# A PSYCHOANALYTIC APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONAL DECLINE: BOWEN THEORY AS A TOOL FOR ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS

by

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An approach to organizations which views them as social constructions provides new insights into the phenomenon of organizational decline. In this view, organizations are seen not as objective entities, but, rather, are viewed as products of the human beings who comprise their membership. This view also sees human beings as actors whose behavior is governed not only by rationality, but also by unconscious processes. Any full understanding of organizational action requires an appreciation of the extent to which human beings are governed by the dynamics of the psyche, which operates outside of conscious awareness. An approach to organizational decline which encompasses these assumptions examines how the members of the organization consciously and/or unconsciously collaborate to create the conditions of decline.

This research begins with a psychoanalytic model of human behavior, Bowen Theory, which explains how individuals function within relationship systems such as families and organizations. The theory also examines how dysfunction is created within those systems when the relationship process becomes ineffective or dysfunctional. Using

the case study method, the dissertation describes how the decline experienced by three distinct organizations can be understood as a consequence of the relationship process created and sustained by the participants in each of the organization's human system.

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# CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

## Organizational Decline: An Often Unacknowledged Aspect of Organizational Life

Every day, organizations die. While organizational death has always been a potential final outcome of any organization's birth, in recent years it appears that that outcome is more likely than ever to occur. Major segments of the American industrial and service base -- manufacturing, automotive, and banking are prominent examples -- have suffered significant losses over the period from the late 1970s through the early 1990s. Daily news stories, government studies and reports, and popular books often contain statistics on and accounts of the disappearance or diminution of organizations of all forms, sizes, missions, or age.

Organizations have also experienced daily problems significant enough to affect negatively both the operations of the organization and the professional and personal lives of those who work within them. Lowered productivity, decreased morale, heightened levels of interpersonal and interorganizational conflict, increased turnover, and faulty decision-making processes are all among the characteristics of organizations which may be experiencing some form of decline. Managers and employees alike complain about the inequity, insanity, and sometimes even the inhumanity of organizational life.

Organization leaders, internal and external consultants, theorists and experts on management and organizational processes have always been kept busy trying to find appropriate methods for making these dysfunctional organizations more effective and productive.

Yet, despite the prevalence of organizational decline in our society, our understanding of why organizations decline is limited. Americans have always believed strongly in the notions of progress and success. Until recently, the general American experience itself has been perceived as one of constant growth and expansion. Acknowledging the reality of decline, in whatever realm that decline may be found or whatever its causes might be, becomes tantamount to an admission of failure. In a society which deeply cherishes its myths of success, such an admission is not easy to make. As one consequence of our societal reluctance to acknowledge that decline occurs, organizational theorists have tended to ignore that area for research until only recently.

## Statement of the Problem

It is in the years since the late 1970s that what is now considered the "decline literature" has developed. Researchers and theorists working in this area have approached the issue with what is considered in this dissertation to be a limited set of assumptions. Those theorists have assumed that decline is a consequence of either changes in the environment which result in the selection of certain organizations to live and others to die or failures of managers to control rationally and effectively the organization's external

and internal processes.

What is missing from the current literature on organizational decline are approaches to that phenomenon which recognize organizations as social constructions. In this view, organizations are seen not as objective entities in and of themselves, but, rather, are viewed as the products of the human beings who comprise their membership. This view also sees human beings as actors whose behavior is governed not only by rationality, but also by unconscious processes. Any full understanding of organizational action requires an appreciation of the extent to which human beings are governed by the dynamics of the psyche, which operates outside of conscious awareness. An approach to organizational decline which encompasses these assumptions would examine how the members of the organization consciously and/or unconsciously collaborate to create the conditions of decline. This dissertation has been undertaken to begin the process of providing such an alternative conception.

To achieve that purpose, the research begins with a model of human behavior, Bowen Theory, which explains how individuals function within relationship systems such as families and organizations. The theory also examines how dysfunction is created within those systems when the relationship process becomes ineffective. Using the case study method, the research describes how the decline experienced by three distinct organizations can be understood as a consequence of the relationship process created and sustained by the participants in each of the organization's human system.

## Significance of the Study

This research is significant in at least two specific ways. First, the research approaches the issue of organizational decline from a point of view which has not yet been considered by other researchers or theorists. The study thus adds a significant perspective that is entirely novel to the literature.

Second, the research grounds its approach to organizational decline in a specific model of human functioning. That model calls attention to the complex nature of human functioning, emphasizing the interdependence and reciprocal nature of relationships of human beings in any social system. The model's systems view allows one to observe how people interact and influence one another from a neutral perspective. From that perspective, all contributions to the development and maintenance of the system are equal in importance; with such a neutral perspective, the concepts of blame or linear responsibility, concepts which permeate other models of organizational functioning, lose their meaning.

This model of human functioning has some important potential practical implications for organization and management theory. Current theoretical models and organizational practices generally assume that managers are fully responsible for organizational success or failure. Yet, if managers are only one segment of a human system which, as a whole, determines success or failure, a new conception of responsibility within organizations will be needed to include those who are currently

excluded. If organizational action, including the development of decline, is a function of and influenced by the behavior of all who are a part of the system, then management practices and theories must be developed or expanded to take account of the power of all who participate in the shaping of the system. Finally, if decline can be understood as the result of an ineffective relationship process and if an effective process depends upon the mature and responsible functioning of all members of the system, promoting the development and supporting the assertion of individual, independent thinking and action will come to be seen in a new light and perhaps become an organizational imperative.

## Research Design and Questions

The research design of this dissertation is grounded in the neo-idealistic tradition of sociology which assumes that the purpose of social science research is the development of understanding. Through the presentation of case studies, the dissertation tells the story of three organizations that have experienced decline as described in the literature. Each case study describes the nature of the organization, identifies the relationship processes evident within the organization, and demonstrates how those processes create organizational decline.

Two strategies were used to obtain the data. The researcher's participation in the life of each organization was used to extract powerful and yet representative examples of organizational events and to capture the essence of the human ambiance of the organizations. Then, focused interviews with current and past employees were used to

elicit from participants their perceptions about the organizations' relationship processes and their intellectual understandings of and emotional responses to organizational events, processes, and relationships.

The data gathered were used to develop case studies which address the primary research question of this dissertation: can Bowen Theory be used as a tool for understanding organizational decline? In order to answer that question, three secondary questions were addressed for each organization:

1. What is the basic balance of the relationship system?
2. What are the primary relationship processes evident within the system?
3. How do these processes combine to create organizational decline?

## Limitations of the Study

There are three different limitations of this research. First, this study suffers the same limitation which can be applied to all case studies, i.e., a limitation on the generalizability of the findings. Proponents of the method agree that case study findings are not generalizable to populations or universes, but are useful to expand and generalize theory. (Yin, 1989). The three organizations examined in this dissertation are specific and limited in their representation of the organizational world. Each is small, composed of no more than forty persons, and each belongs to the public or non-profit sector of organizations. Additional research is needed to determine more fully how Bowen Theory can be used to understand decline in different forms and sizes of organizations.

Second, in this study, organizations were identfiable only because the researcher had worked in each previously and had maintained a journal which chronicled some of the organizational processes and events as they occurred during her years at each. As will be discussed in more detail later in the dissertation, conducting research on declining organizations presents some special methodological problems. Identifying organizations which are experiencing decline is often difficult. Organizational decline is often identified only after the organization has ceased to exist. In cases where employees are caught in a dysfunctional system, they are often unable to discern clearly the dynamics which create the dysfunction until they have removed themselves from the situation. Thus, decline is often available for study only retrospectively, making it difficult for researchers to observe and detail fully the process as it unfolds. Some richness of detail may always be lost, as some has undoubtedly been lost in this research.

Finally, this dissertation applies the concepts of Bowen Theory to organizational action in a way that has not been applied previously. Those who believe that there is limited utility in transferring a theory from its original frame to another may be critical of the research. The study may also be susceptible to critique by Bowen Theory purists. The researcher, however, believes that the theory as used provides important insights into organizational action, particularly into the phenomenon of decline, insights which would otherwise be unavailable.

# CHAPTER TWO

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Introduction

It is only in recent years that organizational theorists and researchers have turned their attention to the phenomenon of organizational decline. Golembiewski (1990) and Murray and Jick (1985) point to the 1977 publication of Hannon and Freeman's article "The Population Ecology of Organizations" as the "academic birth certificate of decline research." (Golembiewski, 1990, p. 108). The decline literature has developed as a counterpoint to the bias toward growth generally found in the literature of organization theory, organization behavior, and organization development. (Golembiewski, 1990; Krantz, 1985; Murray and Jick, 1985; Scherrer, 1988; Sutton, Eisenhardt, and Jucker, 1986; and Whetten, 1980).

Why has there been such a bias toward the study of growth in the several organization literatures? Morgan (1986) has pointed to the powerful impact that the view of organizations as organisms has had on the field. One consequence of seeing organizations as organisms is to assume that growth of the organization is as necessary and natural as that of the organism. Hence, the bias seems implicit in the metaphor.

Murray and Jick (1985) also note that despite evidence of economic slowdowns

and declines in the economy as a whole in the 1970s, most researchers still tend to cling to "assumptions of growth and virtually unlimited opportunity." (1985, p. 111). Golembiewski observes that, despite the continuing downturns in the economy and the problems of growing scarcity during the decade of the 1980s, organizational writers have continued to retain this blind spot and focus primarily on issues related to growth. Whetten argues further that the "culture of success" is such a strong feature of American society that even acknowledging, much less dealing with, the possibility or reality of decline is psychologically difficult.

> So powerful is the association between growth and success and between decline and failure in our society that Scott (1976) has proposed that the chief issue in the management of declining organizations is not whether management is capable of saving them but whether they are willing to make the attempt. (Whetten, 1980, p. 343).

Morgan (1986) reinforces Whetten's point when he discusses how the "population ecology view of organizations revives the ideology of social Darwinism, which stressed that social life is based on the laws of nature and that only the fittest will survive." (1986, p. 76). Growth and survival become equated with goodness, decline with failure and weakness.

## Overview of the Decline Literature

The literature reviewed offers several different expressions of the phenomenon of decline. The most general are presented by Murray and Jick (1985), who comment upon literature covering retrenchment, crisis, and decline, but do not offer any specific definitions or parameters for these phenomena. Hirschman (1970) describes decline as

the deteriorating and unsatisfactory organization performance that creates dissatisfaction among the organization's members or consumers. Whetten offers two definitions of decline as found in the literature. The first uses "the term decline...to describe the general climate, or orientation in an organization." (Whetten, 1980, p. 346).

More specific definitions of decline, often accompanied by precise ways of measurement, are common. Scherrer (1988) offers no formal definition of decline, but includes a series of measurable external and internal warning signals which are all indicators of the general condition. Whetten presents the second characterization of decline as "cutbacks in the size of an organization's workforce, profits, budgets, clients, and so forth." (1980, p. 345). Cummings, Blumenthal, and Greiner follow Whetten and see "[d]ecline-as-cutback [as] an actual reduction in the scale of an organization's operations." (1983, p. 378). Lorange and Nelson equate the concepts of deterioration and decline, both of which can be assessed by "conventional measures such as total sales, profitability, market share, and loss of technological leadership..." (1987, p. 41).

In a book which compiles what they consider to be the best articles in the decline literature, Cameron, Sutton, and Whetten (1988) acknowledge that there is no current consensus on the definition of decline. They propose a new working definition, which they believe will integrate previous work on the subject and provide a guide for future research. They define decline as a "two-stage phenomenon in which, first, an organization's adaptation to its domain, or microniche, deteriorates, and second, resources are reduced within the organization." (Cameron, et. al., 1988, p. 6).

Why do organizations deteriorate or decline? The alternatives discussed in the literature can be classified into two primary categories. Theorists such as Aldrich (1979) and Hannon and Freeman (1977) focus on the population level and argue that natural selection, governed by competition and environmental constraints, determines which classes of organizations will survive. With the level of analysis at the population level, population ecology pays little attention to rational choice. It also attaches little importance to the role of strategic choice by managers. Since the environment selects organizations for survival by altering their resource niches, there appears to be little that organizational managers can do which will make a difference.

The population ecology model assumes a functionalist stance, asserting that the social world, the environment, exists independently and deterministically, with the environment controlling all. As such, it assumes that all that is of interest or importance about organizations is the life and death processes, that is, which populations of organizations survive and which die out. All that happens within the "black box" of the organization - what its purposes are, how those purposes are decided, what processes exist, how the organization might enact its own environment - are unimportant in the population ecology model.

In his book, *Time, Chance, and Organization*, (1985), Herbert Kaufman offers an analysis of organizational death which speaks primarily from the population ecology perspective. He asserts that organizations theoretically should be able to live forever, unless they are destroyed by external forces. Why then, he asks, do so many

organizations routinely die? One of the more interesting aspects of his analysis is that, unlike many other writings from that perspective, Kaufman includes some consideration of the organizations' internal workings -- what goes on inside the "black box" -- in his discussion.

Kaufman begins his analysis by defining what he means by "organization." "One activity, common to all organizations, is a rough measure of an organization's existence. It is the deliberate demarcation of the organization's boundaries." (Kaufman, 1985, p. 13). He argues that if boundaries are present and maintained, the entity so bounded will likely contain other traits and processes commonly considered characteristic of organizations. Once those boundaries disappear, the organization can be seen to have died.

Kaufman considers but rejects competing explanations as to why organizations die. He dismisses the life-cycle theories, which assume that organizations, like organisms, have predictable but limited life spans, because those theories fail to account for the great variation in life spans of even quite similar organizations. Though he agrees that some few organizations may "commit suicide," he does not find this explanation applicable to the vast majority of deaths. He believes that catastrophes which destroy organizations are also rare and cannot be used to explain adequately the cause of the deaths of so many different kinds of organizations. Kaufman provides his own theory as to why so many organizations die.

> The most plausible hypothesis, in my judgment, is that the inflows of energy and other resources necessary for them to keep their activities going, to keep their engines running dry up. Sometimes the required inflows cease because resources are exhausted. Sometimes the resources are as available as ever, but the organizations are decreasingly successful in attracting them. Indeed, organizations may be unable even to elicit continued contributions of labor and obedience from their own members. (Kaufman, 1985, p. 27).

According to Kaufman, organizations develop resource problems because of two factors. First, the environment in which they operate is subject to incessant change and turbulence. Most of the turbulence is an outcome of human activity, which has its effects felt in the physical world and within the social, economic, and technological systems which create and surround organizations. Perhaps the most volatile element in the organizations' environment are other organizations. Kaufman notes that organizations are products of more than intellect or will; they are reflective of the human tendency -- be it inborn or learned -- to form groups. Thus, it should be no surprise that new organizations are constantly being born. As some are being born, others are just as constantly dying out. And, at the same time, organizations are constantly undergoing change.

> And since every organization is interlocked with others through overlapping memberships and exchanges of goods and services, each such alteration of structure or behavior impinges on its neighbors and trading partners. Their own actions intensify the inconstancy of their surroundings. (Kaufman, 1985, p. 42).

Second, adjusting to the turbulence in the environment is not a simple matter.

Here Kaufman looks inside organizations to examine how they adjust to rapidly changing environmental conditions. He finds that they generally are unable to adjust effectively, for the human decision-making and implementation processes themselves are complex, difficult to manage, and fraught with uncertainty and error. Humans are not capable of achieving maximum rationality. The likelihood that an organization will be able continually to calibrate its response to environmental change so finely as to assure its longevity is, according to Kaufman, relatively low.

So, how then does one explain the fact that some organizations do indeed survive? Kaufman finds the answer to be related to the workings of chance. He speaks metaphorically, seeing the environment as a powerful net which continually passes over the mass of interlocked organizations. The pattern of the net is constantly changing, with the mesh sometimes so fine that only a few organizations can pass through, sometimes so coarse that many can escape its hold. The probability that an organization will escape the net forever is low, but it can and does happen on occasion. The fact that some pass through and others get caught has little to do with the organizations themselves or with the strategies their human managers use to respond to the environment. Survival has everything to do with chance.

In a book in which he develops his theory of bureaucratic decisionmaking, Anthony Downs (1967) also offers an analysis of organizational decline. He begins his work by presenting his views on the ways in which bureaus may be born and the ways in which they may experience decline. Adopting a population ecology stance, Downs

asserts that bureaus have predictable life cycles.

Downs believes that bureaus can be created in one of four ways:

1. a group devoted to a charismatic leader may band together to create a bureaucratic structure which will promote the leader's ideas;

2. one or more groups in society may create a bureau from scratch in order to have the bureau carry out a specific social function which is important to them;

3. a new bureau may be split off from an existing structure; or

4. a group of entrepreneurs promoting a particular policy may gain sufficient external support to establish and maintain a bureau which is devoted to promoting that policy.

No matter how the bureau is created, it demonstrates some specific characteristics. It initially is dominated by zealots or advocates who believe strongly in the importance of its social function. It normally experiences an initial period of rapid growth. Finally, the bureau immediately must seek additional external sources of support in order to survive.

The growth and survival of new bureaus is always extremely precarious. The organization needs to attract what Downs calls "climbers," those officials who are motivated by such goals as power, prestige, or attachment to an idea or cause, who work hard both to demonstrate the bureau's social value and attract external sources of support. Once the bureau has reached its "initial survival threshold," i.e., once it has reached a size where it can provide useful social benefits and an age where it has developed

standard operating procedures, the bureau will have gained a certain initial degree of security. (Downs, 1967, p. 9).

The bureau then experiences some predictable stages of growth and decline. Like others writing from the population ecology perspective, Downs sees bureaus as subject primarily to forces in the environment.

> The major causes of both growth and decline in bureaus are rooted in exogenous factors in the environment. As society develops over time, certain social functions grow in prominence and others decline. Bureaus are inevitably affected more strongly by these external developments than by any purely internal changes. However, the interplay between external and internal developments tends to create certain cumulative effects of growth and decline. They occur because bureaus can experience significant changes in the character of their personnel in relatively short periods of time. (Downs, 1967, pp. 10-11).

Here Downs claims that a process of "natural selection" occurs. Rapidly growing bureaus, which offer enhanced opportunities for innovation and rapid promotion, attract a greater proportion of those individuals who are motivated by such goals than those whom he calls "conservers." Conservers are individuals who dislike the uncertainty or constant change which goes along with rapid growth, but, rather, prefer coordinating action and maintaining rules and routines.

But bureaus do not generally maintain their patterns of rapid growth for long. The bureau encounters forces in the external and internal environments -- e.g., competition from other bureaus for resources or a lowered average level of organizational talent as a function of increasing organizational size -- which act as brakes on growth. When the bureau experiences "decline, stagnation, or just slower than average growth"

(Downs, 1967, p. 13), the climbers depart, to be replaced in top positions by conservers. Conservers are not interested in expanding the bureau's functions or in innovation; their self-interest is not engaged by change.

> As a result, the entire bureau will shift toward greater conserver dominance, thereby reducing its ability to innovate and the desire to expand its functions. Then, whenever opportunities for innovation or function-expansion do present themselves, the bureau will be less able, or willing, to take advantage of them. It may even lose functions to other more aggressive and innovation-prone bureaus. Thus, once a bureau starts to shrink, or even just experiences an abnormally slow growth rate over an extensive period, it sets in motion forces that tend to make it shrink even faster, or grow even more slowly. (Downs, 1967, pp. 13-14).

However, even conservers will resist shrinkages in their resources. Downs believes that resistance to shrinkage is an even stronger force than is the excitement which is generated by growth. The combination of the resistance of the conservers with the ascension of the climbers who have remained in the organization will serve to maintain the life of the bureau.

The second category of decline literature -- which can be called the management-oriented approach -- works at the organizational level of analysis, focusing primarily on internal processes. Most particularly, and in contrast to population ecology, this literature looks at the abilities or inabilities of the manager to function rationally and effectively. Writers operating at this level ask several different questions. First, are the managers using the tools, e.g., balance sheets and income statements, they have at their disposal effectively to manage and control the organization? (Scherrer, 1988). Are they tolerating an unacceptable level of incompetence? (Lorange and Nelson, 1987). Second, are they

able to recognize accurately and quickly the early warning signals of decline? (Lorange and Nelson, 1987; Scherrer, 1988; and Whetten, 1980). Third, are managers able to make the appropriate strategic choices to cope with the internal and external elements of the organization and effectively counter the decline or deterioration? (Cameron, et. al., 1988; Krantz, 1985; Murray and Jick, 1985; Scherrer, 1988; Sutton, et. al., 1986; and Whetten, 1980).

Managers can avoid or deflect decline in each of these areas by following prescriptions presented in the literature. Managers can effectively control the organization by running their businesses on budgets and cash projections (Scherrer, 1988). They should also keep on the lookout for the early warning signals of decline, such as excess staff or cumbersome administrative procedures. When such signs are present, they should mount a cognitively oriented organization development project which will unfreeze-change-refreeze management and revitalize their strategic planning capabilities (Lorange and Nelson, 1987). If, despite their best efforts, decline does occur, managers should follow Sutton, Eisenhardt, and Jucker's "Eight Strategies for Managing Decline" (1986) and thus mitigate the severity of the trauma for the organization and its employees.

Though these management-oriented approaches differ from the population ecology perspective in significant ways, they share a place in the functionalist paradigm. These approaches, derived from Barnard and Simon, share the assumption that managers can and should be aware of and control all that happens in the organization. They also share,

again from Barnard and Simon, a belief in the primacy of the role of rationality in organizational effectiveness. Each approach offers a check-list of measurable indicators of decline that managers can watch out for and provides a prescription for avoiding or dealing with decline. The common denominator is that control and rationality are possible.

## An Alternative View of Decline

In *Readings in Organizational Decline*, Meyer offers a critique of the strengths and weaknesses of the decline literature available through the date of the book's publication in 1988. In his critique, he considers the fact that the majority of the writing on decline has been developed primarily from the functionalist perspective to be a blind spot in the literature. He finds that the predominance of biological analogies has invested organizations with an inappropriate aura of inevitability and objectivity. The use of these analogies has led

> ...observers to underestimate the extent to which their members collaborate actively in constructing and remodeling them. One result is that we fail to appreciate the degree to which organizations enact their own crises and instigate their own declines. (Meyer, 1988, p. 413).

Though Meyer notes that a social-construction approach may present some conceptual and methodological problems for researchers, he believes nonetheless that the literature will only be enriched by including such a perspective.

The use of another metaphor - the psychic prison - provides a very different picture of the process of organizational decline. In contrast to the organism metaphor,

which focuses attention on the abilities or inabilities of management to make appropriate strategic choices in response to internal or external changes, the psychic prison metaphor focuses attention on the impact of unconscious processes on organizational action. As Morgan puts it, "a full understanding of the significance of what we do and say in going about our daily business must always take account of the hidden structure and dynamics of the human psyche." (1986, p. 203). Without such an account, the understanding of organizational decline will remain incomplete.

Harvey and Albertson's (1978) article on neurotic organizations is one effort to examine the effect of unconscious processes on organizational action. They describe the characteristics of organizations which they label as neurotic. Though this work is not formally considered a part of the decline literature base, the descriptors applied to neurotic organizations, e.g., where organization members feel pain, frustration, and lowered self-esteem, are helpful in fleshing out Whetten's definition of decline as stagnation.

Harvey and Albertson note that organizational neurosis arises from the collective dynamics within the organization. They also observe that all organization members, not just the managers, are active participants in creating the problems within the system. Yet the authors cannot provide a full explanation for why or how those dynamics are created or sustained by the organization's members, claiming that "the dynamics supporting such lack of awarness tend to be so deep within the individual and group psyche (Freud, 1951) they are the hardest to identify, make explicit, and change." (1978, p. 177).

Merry and Brown (1990) also use the concept of neurosis to discuss organizational dysfunction, but, in their case, use the lens of Gestalt psychology to approach organizational action. Using analogies, they move from the level of individual Gestalt psychology to the level of organizational systems to define organizational neurosis as "repetitive patterns of pathologic seemingly unchangeable behavior involving a distortion of reality." (Merry and Brown, 1990, p. 20). The distortion of reality takes the form of organizational delusions, which enable members to remain in an unbearable and seemingly unalterable organizational situation. Merry and Brown's work focuses on organizations which may evidence some limited symptoms of neurosis, but have not yet reached the advanced state of decline.

Something of another approach to organizational dysfunction and decline can be found in the popular literature. Schaef and Fassel's book, *The Addictive Organization* (1988), uses the metaphor of addiction to explain dysfunction within organizations. Troubled organizations are created either when dysfunctional individuals operate within the organization or when the organization itself acts in ways similar to those of an individual addict.

Schaef and Fassel identify four different categories of addiction related to organizational life. First, problems arise when a key person within the organization is currently an active addict. Second, the authors believe that Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOAs) and other types of co-dependent personalities bring their emotional problems and personality disorders to their organizational lives. Third, organizations, which hold

vast power and influence over their employees, can serve as addictive substances for individuals, creating the disease of workaholism. Finally, organizations themselves often function as addicts, creating an entire system which is dysfunctional. The dysfunctional system makes it impossible for the individuals who work within it to live healthy and productive lives. Schaef and Fassel's prescription for addressing all of these dysfunctions is for the individuals or organization to undertake a personal and/or system-wide recovery program, modeled after Alcoholics Anonymous' twelve-step program.

Though Schaef and Fassel's work does focus on the psychic and social process within the organization, their description of the diseases of addiction and co-dependence places those illnesses apart from individuals. For Schaef and Fassel, it is the organization which creates the workaholic. Their description of the processes, characteristics, and structures -- such as denial and dishonesty, judgmentalism, or competition -- which are typical of addictive organizations also seem to exist as objective and independent realities, not phenomena created by the individuals who comprise the organizations. It is only the illness or the organization which creates problems, not the individuals within. While their book contains some interesting ideas, it does not provide a completely new perspective on organizational decline. In this case, the fault lies not with the managers or the environment, but with illnesses or the organization itself.

This dissertation has been written to provide a fuller account of how those within an organization create the organization's decline. To do so, Bowen Theory, a psychoanalytic approach to dysfunction in family systems, is used as a tool for

understanding dysfunction and decline in organizations. This approach is grounded in the radical humanist paradigm, which views organizations not as living entities apart from the human beings which comprise them, but instead as socially constructed realities which are created and maintained by conscious and unconscious processes. The psychic prison metaphor conveys the notion that individuals can become trapped and imprisoned by the reality which they create. Dysfunction and decline can thus be seen as a consequence of human beings who have become controlled and trapped within a system which is created by their own interconnected and interdependent psychic processes and social constraints.

# CHAPTER THREE

# BOWEN THEORY

## Overview

Murray Bowen, M.D., was one of the founders in the field of family therapy. Trained as a psychiatrist, early in his career Bowen developed an interest in the treatment of psychotic children and in building a scientific theory which would explain emotional illness. In the early 1950s at the National Institute of Mental Health, Bowen conducted clinical studies of schizophrenic children, first focusing on the relationship of the child to the mother and then extending his research to include the entire family unit. As he conducted his research, Bowen developed a theory of emotional illness which focused on the relationship process within the family system. He eventually founded the Family Center at Georgetown University, where he practiced until his death.

## An Emphasis on Theory

Though trained as a Freudian analyst, at the Menninger Clinic in the late 1940s Bowen became concerned that Freudian psychoanalytic theory and therapy were insufficiently based in science. Though honoring the "monumental contributions" of Freud to the understanding of the nature of emotional illness, Bowen was concerned that Freud's theory was based only on theoretical assumptions, not scientific fact. (Bowen,

1978, pp. 338-339). The absence of proven scientific validity to the theory had created diversions.

> Very early the disciples [of Freud] began to disagree with certain details of the theory (predictable in human relationship systems), and to develop different 'theories,' 'concepts,' and 'schools of thought' based on the differences. They have made such an issue over the 'differences' that they have lost sight of the fact that they all follow Freud's broad assumptions. (Bowen, 1978, p. 339).

As a result, psychoanalysis, in Bowen's view, remained disconnected from medicine and the more basic sciences. A more complete view of emotional illness was needed to bring the art and science of the mind together with that of the body.

Bowen was also concerned about the practice of psychotherapy and the nature of the therapeutic relationship. Freud had defined a theory, a basic framework, for the therapeutic relationship, one which emphasized the importance of the therapist remaining objective and emotionally detached from the patient. This objectivity avoided the patient's transference, the replication of his/her childhood relationships with the therapist. Yet Bowen found that, over time, Freud's theory of analysis had also become disconnected from actual practice.

> The model of the 'involved' therapist became the basic model for the numerous new therapies that were to follow. Most of modern psychotherapy descended from involved therapists, whose basic thinking came from their own version of Freudian ideas. They interpreted whatever appeared relevant. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 356).

Here, too, Bowen was concerned that the lack of coherence with theory and practice failed to serve both the patients and science itself.

Bowen's experience as a clinician at the Menninger Clinic also led him to question the efficacy of the predominant theory and practice. Though traditional psychoanalytic practice focused solely on the relationship of the therapist and the individual patient, Bowen's clinical work brought him into contact with the families of those whom he was treating. He became interested in the family relationships of the schizophrenics who were in-patients, and began to focus on the often intense emotional connections between mothers and their schizophrenic off-spring.

With his research experience supported by his extensive readings in biology and evolutionary theory, Bowen hypothesized that the relationship between a mother and the schizophrenic child might have more than a psychological basis. The symbiosis of the two might be reflective of deep biological processes, nurturing and caretaking, generally found among all living creatures, but in this case to an exaggerated degree. It was his "hunch that emotional illness comes from that part of man that he shares with the lower forms of life." (Bowen, 1978, p. 353).

As he integrated his new thinking on theory and practice with his clinical observations, Bowen took a major step in what he came to call his "Odyssey Toward Science." (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 339-386).

> Early in the research, I made some decisions based on previous thinking about theory. Family research was producing a completely new order of observations...on the premise that psychiatry might eventually become a recognized science...and being aware of the past conceptual problems in psychoanalysis, I chose to use only concepts that would be consistent with a recognized science. This was done in the hope that investigators of the future would more easily be able to see connections between human

> behavior and the accepted sciences than we can. I therefore chose to use concepts that would be consistent with biology and the natural sciences...I carefully excluded all concepts that dealt with inanimate things..and studied the literature for concepts synonymous with biology - that is, I used biological concepts to describe human behavior. (Bowen, 1978, p. 354).

## Family Systems Theory

In 1954, Bowen moved his research effort to the National Institute of Mental Health. At that time, his emphasis shifted formally from the individual to the family unit as a whole. He undertook a research project which brought whole families of a schizophrenic patient onto the ward, where they could be observed as a unit over an extended period of time.

The observations led to some striking conclusions. First, the relationships between the mother and the schizophrenic child, previously studied at Menninger, appeared to be more emotionally intense than previously recognized. Second, the entire family seemed to have relationships which were as emotionally intense as those of the mother and the affected child. The family was so tightly connected to one another that it was difficult to see them as separate and distinct individuals. The family itself could be conceived of as a single emotional unit.

Observing the emotional interconnectedness of the family led Bowen to an interesting conclusion. He and his researchers noted that family members acted in reciprocal relationship to one another. If the schizophrenic child acted out, the parent would respond by taking care of the problem. The child might then, in turn, act weak

to evoke the strong response from the parent. Bowen concluded that human beings did not exist as autonomous individuals, but

> ...have less autonomy in their emotional functioning than is commonly thought...If the family is an emotional unit, however, the people function in ways that are a reflection of what is occurring around them. They have precious little autonomy from their environment. The thoughts, feelings, and behavior of each family member, in other words, both contribute to and reflect what is occurring in the family as a whole. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 9).

It is difficult to overstate the significance of such an assessment. The movement toward conceptualizing dysfunction in an individual as a result of the family system has been characterized as a Kuhnian "paradigm shift." (Kolevzon and Green, 1985). The medical model dominant at the time assumed that pathology in the individual was of purely intrapsychic origin; treatment focused on the individual with the presenting problem. By shifting attention from the individual to the family, Bowen and others in the family movement, through their clinical research, proposed what was a startling proposition in 1957, the accepted birthdate of family therapy.

> While they find meaning in the individual problems or symptoms exhibited by these patients, these manifestations are viewed as consequential or covariate aspects of family relationships. Consequently, the patient or client for the family therapists is the family group rather than the individual, and their intervention targets improvement in the overall family functioning or in specific intrafamily relationship systems. (Kolevzon and Green, 1985, p. 2).

Bowen and his team also found that, no matter what the type or degree of dysfunction exhibited by an individual, each family displayed a similar relationship process. "Families, in other words, while they had widely different attitudes,

personalities, etc., still played out the same fundamental patterns in relationships." (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 10). This fact led Bowen to assume that the relationship processes were natural, that is, formed by nature, and created from long-standing evolutionary dynamics.

In 1959, Bowen moved to Georgetown University, becoming a member of the medical faculty and Department of Psychiatry staff. His work with families on an out-patient basis brought him into contact with those suffering from a broader range of neuroses and psychoses than he had previously seen. He soon became aware that the processes he had seen in families in which schizophrenia was present were visible in all families, including those families which were asymptomatic or "normal." The only difference was that in families with a schizophrenic the processes were more exaggerated.

These observations led Bowen to believe that families differ from each other quantitatively but not qualitatively. They exist on a continuum from those which experience none or few clinical problems to those which are seriously dysfunctional. In families where the interconnectedness and reactivity is less intense, the degree of impairment of functioning is less severe. In other families where the emotional process is intense and relationships highly interdependent and reactive, more serious impairments are likely to be found. Bowen came to see emotional illness, including such severe illnesses as schizophrenia, as an outcome of an impaired relationship process.

> Schizophrenia is not a foreign process in the sense of being inflicted on us by a defective gene or an intruding virus. We create the schizophrenia we see around us. We create it by virtue of the way we function everyday.

> We continually make decisions and do things that tend to impair as well as promote the functioning of others. All of us participate in groups that function in ways that make it more difficult for certain group members to function. This process is most obvious in families, *but it can occur in any group* [emphasis added]. When the process reaches a certain quantitative level of emotional intensity (sufficient autonomy has been lost), the stage is set for the emergence of clinical schizophrenia or some other serious problem. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 13).

During these early years of the family movement, while most in the field attended to the development of therapeutic methods, Bowen maintained his focus on building his theory. His early research and thinking led him to two basic conclusions about the etiology of emotional illness. First, emotional illness was not merely an outcome of intrapsychic dysfunction, but had roots in the naturally occurring life processes that man shared with other forms of life. Second, emotional illness was not individually based, but a function of the relationship system in which that individual operates.

With these assumptions as the foundation, Bowen developed the core of his family systems theory over the years 1957-1963. His six original core concepts included: differentiation of self, nuclear family emotional system, family projection process, triangles, multi-generational transmission process, and sibling position. In 1975, he added two concepts, emotional cut-off and societal regression. He at first called his interlocking concepts "family systems theory," but soon found that term to be misunderstood, overused, and confused with general systems theory.

> At the time my theory was developed, I knew nothing about general systems theory. Back in the 1940s, I attended one lecture by Bertalanffy, which I did not understand, and another by Norbert Wiener, which was perhaps a little more understandable. Both dealt in systems *of* thinking.

> The degree to which I heard something in those lectures that influenced my later thinking is debatable. In those years, I was strongly influenced by reading and lectures in aspects of evolution, biology, the balance of nature, and the natural sciences. I was trying to view man as a part of nature rather than separate from nature. (Bowen, 1978, p. 359).

To avoid continuing confusion, in 1975 the name of the theory was formally changed to Bowen Theory.

## Bowen Theory

### The Emotional System

Bowen Theory begins with the assumption that man's behavior, like the behavior of all living creatures, is driven by the functioning of an emotional system.

> Defined broadly, the concept postulates the existence of a naturally occurring system *in all forms of life* that enables an organism to receive information (from within itself and from the environment), to integrate that information, and to respond on the basis of it. The emotional system includes mechanisms such as those involved in finding and obtaining food, reproducing, fleeing enemies, rearing young, and other aspects of social relationships. It includes responses that range from the most automatic instinctual ones to those that contain a mix of automatic and learned responses. Guided by the emotional system, organisms appear to respond sometimes based on self-interest and sometimes based on the interests of the group. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 28).

The concept of emotional system assumes that much of human behavior is governed by processes which have existed since the beginning of the evolutionary process.

The emotional system encompasses the intellectual and feeling systems. The intellectual system is that most recently acquired part of the human nervous system that governs the human capacity to think and understand. In evolutionary terms, the

development of man's cerebral cortex is a relatively recent phenomenon; it is the main difference between man and the lower forms of life. Humans can reflect upon and give reasons for their behavior; the lower forms of life cannot. The feeling system is conceptualized as the connection which brings the emotional processes into conscious awareness. While lower forms and humans may both have identical emotional responses to threatening situations, e.g., by trembling or running away, only humans can be consciously aware that they are feeling fear.

The emotional system can be triggered by stimuli experienced either internally or externally. Reactions may be manifested on the emotional, intellectual, or feeling levels; the systems also may mutually influence each other. Bowen Theory makes two important points about the operation of these systems. First, the theory asserts that "much of the time *man's intellect operates in the service of the feeling and emotional process*," (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 32), that man's actions, attitudes, and beliefs are governed by subjectivity, not objective assessments. Second, it holds that the feeling system is a more powerful influence on social process than is the intellectual system. Feelings carry the power of two systems at work, for they are the conscious overlay of the emotional response.

Bowen used findings and concepts developed from research on animal behavior to help explicate and support the idea of an emotional system and relationship process which effects the functioning of humans. Those studies indicate that animals, too, are guided by an emotional and relationship system, though one which differs from that

found in humans. While these studies in sociobiology suggest that certain animal behaviors and relationship processes are accounted for by specific genes, which are either maintained or disappear through the evolutionary process,

> [f]amily theory, in contrast, assumes that functioning and behavior of all organisms are significantly influenced by an emotional system that is anchored in the life process at a level probably more basic than genes...The relationship processes that operate between intercellular components, between cells, between organ systems, and between individual members of a species possible are organized based on some common principles. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 48).

Though they differ here, too, both sociobiological and family theory also emphasize the importance of the function of an individual's behavior within the broader relationship system. Family theory assumes that behavior of an individual is affected by processes which exist outside of that person and can be understood by the function that the individual provides in maintaining his/her relationship system. For Bowen Theory, the important point is that

> [f]amily research and sociobiological research have both 'discovered' an emotional system that directs the functioning of individuals...*All life is systems*. This systems organization is always evident within the confines of individual organisms and is also evident *between* individuals when they are in some type of enduring association with one another. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 51).

## Differentiation of Self

The cornerstone of Bowen Theory is centered in the concept of differentiation of self. The process of differentiation has three components. First, it includes the degree to which individuals develop and maintain a solid sense of identity, even in the face of

pressures from the surrounding relationship system. Second, differentiation refers to the ability of individuals to maintain a separation of their emotional and intellectual systems, and thus to act on the basis of logical thinking rather than merely react on the basis of emotion. Third, it refers to the level of emotional fusion or "stuck-togetherness" which exists among members of the relationship system.

Individuals who are able to maintain their own sense of identity, to distinguish between thinking and feeling processes when acting, and remain emotionally connected to others without being consumed are considered to operate at higher levels of differentiation. Those individuals who are guided more by the thoughts and values of others, who are more emotionally reactive, and who bind most of their energy in relationships with others can be considered to have lower levels of differentiation.

Bowen Theory asserts that well-differentiated individuals are those who demonstrate high levels of solid-self which "is made up of clearly defined beliefs, opinions, convictions, and life principles." (Jones, 1980, p. 46). Solid-self is built slowly over time and is internally consistent. Those principles are not compromised or changed by pressures from others, but are maintained and used as a guide for intellectual action and decision making.

In contrast, those who function at lower levels of differentiation function from their pseudo-self.

> Pseudo-self refers to knowledge and beliefs acquired from others that are incorporated by the intellect and negotiable in relationships with others. Pseudo-self is created by emotional pressures and can be modified by

emotional pressure." (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 103).

Decisions and actions are made based more on feeling than on intellectual reasoning.

Bowen developed a scale of differentiation to illustrate the concept for theoretical, not practical purposes. He intended the scale to show that people have varying degrees of differentiation and to make plain how dramatically the behavior of those at different segments of the scale appears. The scale was also intended to eliminate the need for the concept of "normal" behavior, which Bowen found to be ill-defined in psychiatry. The behavior of people functioning at lower levels of the scale is not automatically classified as "abnormal;" that behavior might be quite functional under certain circumstances, with individuals remaining asymptomatic. However, when those individuals are exposed to significant anxiety and stress, they will more easily descend into dysfunction than those who operate at higher levels of differentiation. The scale, therefore, provides a measurement of an individual's likely adaptiveness to stress. A summary of the scale is offered below.

0 - 25: Lowest level of differentiation. Individuals at this level are so intensely fused emotionally that they live in a feeling-dominated world and are unable to distinguish between thinking and feeling. They invest almost all of their energy in relationships, so there is little energy left to pursue life goals. "They grew up as dependent appendages of their parents, following which they seek equally dependent relationships in which they can borrow enough strength to function. A no-self person who is adept at pleasing his boss may make a better employee than one who has a self." (Bowen, 1978, p. 367).

25-50: Moderate level of differentiation. Individuals at this level exhibit some beginning differentiation between the emotional and intellectual systems, expressing primarily as pseudo-selves. Though they remain predominantly guided by the emotional system, they have more flexibility in their functioning than those at the lower level. They remain relationship-oriented, with their self-esteem dependent upon others. "In their overt emotional dependence on others, they are sensitized to reading the moods, expressions, and postures of the other, and to responding openly with direct expression of feeling or impulsive action. They are in a lifelong pursuit of the ideal close relationship." (Bowen, 1978, p. 368).

50-75: Moderate to good differentiation. Individuals have sufficient differentiation for the emotional and intellectual systems to function as a cooperative team. The intellectual system is developed to such an extent that it can function autonomously when anxiety increases. Individuals have developed at least a reasonable level of solid-self, and are no longer controlled by the emotional-feeling world. "They are able to live life more freely and to have more satisfying emotional lives within the emotional system. They can participate fully in emotional events knowing they can extricate themselves with logical reasoning when the need arises." (Bowen, 1978, p. 369).

75-100: This quadrant of the scale is considered to be hypothetical. Bowen considered it highly unlikely, if not impossible, for anyone to be 100 percent differentiated. Few people actually function above the 75 percent level.

Individuality/Togetherness Balance

Bowen Theory asserts that two counterbalancing life forces - individuality and togetherness - are at play within the relationship system. Individuality is that force which guides a person to act as an independent, self-determined, and responsible individual.

The togetherness force leads one toward others and "is derived from the universal need for 'love,' approval, emotional closeness, and agreement." (Bowen, 1978, p. 277). In any individual or group, the interaction of the two forces exists in a state of balance which is continually adjusted as people within the relationship system consciously and unconsciously monitor and change their own behavior in reaction to that of others.

An optimally functioning relationship system would have a 50/50 balance between individuality and togetherness. A well-balanced system composed of people whose level of differentiation enables them to be in contact with others while maintaining their own solid-self provides sufficient flexibility for the system to respond to changing circumstances.

> The level of stability, cohesiveness, and cooperation in a group is affected by the interplay of individuality and togetherness. The capacity of groups of people to be closely and cooperatively involved is influenced by the capacity of individuals to follow their own directives and by the degree to which individuals are oriented by the directives of the group. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 65).

Not all systems, however, operate at that perfect balance.

All human relationships exhibit a tendency to ebb and flow, at some moments emphasizing closeness and togetherness, at others distance and individuality. That ebb and flow helps regulate the symbiosis of the system. People may react to the objective reality of those fluctuations and have feelings about those reactions. Individuals at lower levels of differentiation, who are more emotionally fused with the relationship system, are more likely to become threatened and anxious by changes in the system and to act in

ways that they hope will reduce their anxiety. Those relationships are seen as having little flexibility. More well differentiated people can respond flexibly and calmly to the ever-changing cycles of closeness and distance.

Individuals in relationship systems which operate at lower levels of differentiation are subject to a variety of stresses. As the individuals' functioning is more dependent on the relationship, they become more quickly threatened by changes in the balance of the system. Their sense of well-being and self-esteem are dependent on how they believe themselves to be seen by others. Those individuals who are intensely invested in a relationship system also tend to have blurred emotional boundaries between themselves and others. As boundaries disappear, anxiety can become contagious within the relationship system.

> An important consequence of anxiety is that it creates pressure on people *to adapt to one another* in ways that will reduce each other's anxiety. This pressure for adaptation can produce changes in each person's behavior that result in the anxiety being expressed, bound, or absorbed in certain aspects of the way people interact and function. This anxiety-binding process can stabilize a relationship system, but it further reduces the flexibility of the system and plays a role in the development of clinical symptoms. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 78).

Triangles

An emotional triangle is created when anxiety increases in a two-person relationship. One of the relationship partners then brings in, or triangles, a third person as a way to relieve some of the pressure or anxiety centered in the original relationship. The anxiety, which was originally confined to two people, now can be diluted by

involving three people. The issues which originally created the anxiety are rarely resolved through triangling, but the anxiety and discomfort are diminished, thus enabling the original two-person relationship to regain its equilibrium.

Meanwhile, the third party who was triangled in now has to deal with the anxiety transmitted to him or her from the original twosome. He/she may now experience difficulties in his/her relationship with the member of the original pair who did not bring him/her into the problem. In many instances, his/her anxiety will now spill over into a relationship he/she has with another, creating interlocking triangles. Soon, anxiety, which originally was confined to two people, spreads throughout an entire relationship system. The transmission of anxiety occurs automatically, outside of the awareness of those within the system.

There are a few ways that the development of interlocking triangles may be avoided. The original twosome can choose to deal directly and non-reactively with whatever issue arose to create the discomfort within the relationship. The third party who is contacted by a member of the original pair can maintain contact, but not permit him/herself to be drawn into taking sides or attempting to fix the problem the pair experience. If the third party cannot help but become triangled, he/she can keep the anxiety transmitted and not pass it on to others. Unfortunately, people are not always able to do these things.

Nuclear Family Emotional System

This concept refers to the patterns of functioning within a nuclear family in a single generation. These patterns are a product of the undifferentiation of the family members. They are also both replicas of family members' past generations and models for generations of the family to come.

The nuclear family generally begins when two individuals marry. People usually pick partners with similar levels of differentiation, developed in their own families of origin. Bowen believed that the rituals and processes of mating, marriage, and reproduction are largely guided by emotional-instinctual forces.

The level of differentiation of each partner determines the degree of emotional fusion in a marriage. The lower the level of differentiation, the greater the fusion. It is likely that one spouse will become more dominant while the other adapts - an example of the relationship process of overfunctioning and underfunctioning. The pseudo-selves of the partners merge to create one self. This fusion can create anxiety in one or both partners.

In marriages, partners have some typical patterns of responding to anxiety: emotional distance from one another, marital conflict, illness in a spouse, or impairment in one or more children. The particular pattern chosen in a nuclear family will be a replica of one found in the spouses' families of origin. Though the pattern may serve to maintain the equilibrium of the system for a time, symptoms or dysfunction are likely

to develop.

Underfunctioning and Overfunctioning

The systems approach emphasizes the interrelatedness and interdependencies that exist among individuals within a system. As noted previously, the behavior of individuals is a function of what is happening around them. Within a relationship system, people assume different functioning positions which operate in reciprocal relationship to one another.

As noted above, overfunctioning and underfunctioning are typically seen in relationship systems. The overfunctioning individual assumes responsibility and takes over to compensate for the real or imagined inadequacies of others. The underfunctioning person feels incapable or reluctant to undertake certain activities and thus becomes dependent upon the overfunctioning person to assume those roles or tasks. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 56). While underfunctioning and overfunctioning can sometimes contribute to the operation of the system, they can lead to system breakdown when they remain fixed. When functioning positions are immutable, there is little flexibility in the system to react to change.

Family Projection Process

Undifferentiation in a marriage frequently results in the impairment of one or more of the children within the nuclear family. Anxiety between the parents is bound in a triangle of father-mother-child, with the child absorbing the bulk. The triangle typically

revolves around the mother, who is usually most intensely involved with the child. According to Bowen, "[t]he [projection] process is so universal that it is present to some degree in all families." (Bowen, 1978, p. 379). The degree of impairment of the child(ren) can range from minimal to severe.

The undifferentiation in a family is not projected equally onto all the children. It generally is directed first to one child. If that child cannot handle all of the undifferentiation, the process is repeated with other children. The amount of undifferentiation projected determines the degree of impairment in the child. The child or children who are "selected" will be the ones with whom the mother is most intensely emotionally invested.

> The process begins with anxiety in the mother. The child responds anxiously to mother, which she misperceives as a problem in the child. The anxious parental effort goes into sympathetic, solicitous, overprotective energy, which is directed more by the mother's anxiety than the reality needs of the child. It establishes a pattern of infantilizing the child, who gradually becomes more impaired and more demanding. (Bowen, 1978, p. 381).

Multi-generational Transmission Process

The multi-generational transmission process extends the nuclear family projection process onward through multiple generations. The child who was selected for the family projection grows up with a lower level of differentiation than his/her parents and function less effectively. Following the impaired child through life -- through marriage and reproduction and parenting -- and through successive generations discloses a continuing

line of decline in functioning of individuals. After several generations, it is likely that the process will produce a highly dysfunctional person, with an impairment such as schizophrenia.

Emotional Cut-off

All persons have some degree of unresolved emotional attachment to their families when they are grown. The lower the level of differentiation in an individual, the greater the amount of unresolved emotional attachment to one's parents. Emotional cut-off describes the process some people use to attempt to separate themselves from their parents in order to start their own lives.

The cut-off can be intrapsychic, maintaining emotional isolation or distance while still in physical contact with one's parents, physical, by cutting off all contact through running or moving away, or some combination of the two. The more intense an individual's cut-off, the more likely he/she is to replicate intensely in his/her own relationships a version of the parental family problems or to experience cut-off from his/her offspring in the future. Bowen believed that it is critical for nuclear families to retain some viable emotional contact with the past generation in order to promote effective and asymptomatic functioning for families in both generations.

Sibling Position

Bowen developed this concept by adapting Toman's work developing personality profiles of people from each sibling position. Though Toman worked from the

framework of the individual and concentrated on "normal" families, Bowen found his thesis -- that important personality characteristics fit an individual's sibling position -- compelling.

Toman developed ten basic sibling personality profiles which "automatically permit one to know the profile of any sibling position, and *all things being equal*, to have a whole body of presumptive knowledge about anyone." (Bowen, 1978, p. 385). Bowen used these profiles as a way to understand the level of differentiation and the projection process from generation to generation.

> For instance, if an oldest turns out to be more like a youngest, that is strong evidence that he was the most triangled child. If the oldest is an autocrat, that is strong evidence of a moderate degree of impairment. An oldest who functions calmly and responsibly is good evidence of a better level of differentiation. (Bowen, 1978, p. 385).

The profiles help fill in the gaps for people in past generations for whom reliable data cannot be found.

Societal Regression

In 1972 and again in 1974, Bowen developed papers describing his ideas about how the emotional problems in society resemble those found in families. Bowen Theory describes how families subjected to continuing anxiety lose their ability to act according to intellectually determined principles, and react emotionally to relieve the anxiety of the moment. Bowen believed that society, faced with chronic anxiety created by such problems as the population explosion, decreasing resources, and pollution, was reacting

in a similar fashion, and

> ...that the efforts to relieve the symptoms result in more emotional band-aid legislation, which increased the problem; and the cycle keeps repeating, just as the family goes through similar cycles to the states we call emotional illness. (Bowen, 1978, p. 386).

Chronic/Acute Anxiety

Anxiety is the force which drives the functioning of the relationship system. The lower the level of differentiation within an individual or group, the less that individual or group is able to adapt effectively to stress. When the stress within a system remains high and its adaptiveness low, the capacity of the system to function will be impaired.

Bowen Theory distinguishes between two different forms of anxiety, acute and chronic. Acute anxiety is experienced in response to a real threat to the relationship system and is generally found to be time-limited. Chronic anxiety arises in response to imagined threats and can continue indefinitely. It can be activated by any number of forces. Once chronic anxiety becomes felt within a system, it generates its own momentum and continues independently from whatever event might have sparked it. Within a relationship system, chronic anxiety is fed by peoples' reactions to a change in the balance of the relationship system.

It is important to note three other features of chronic anxiety. First, anxiety can be highly infectious within a relationship system. Distress experienced by one person can quickly be felt and spread to others who are sensitized to the first individual. Second, the lower the level of differentiation within a relationship system, the less able is that

system to adapt effectively to stress. Finally, when anxiety becomes chronic, the system, whatever the level of differentiation, is likely to develop symptoms of dysfunction.

Therapy from a Bowenian Perspective

The goals of Bowen family therapy are to reduce anxiety to relieve symptoms and to improve differentiation of self. To achieve that goal, therapy seeks to "address the thoughtful capacity of the individual as much as possible." (Papero, 1990, p. 68). Since lower levels of differentiation are associated with greater emotional reactivity, therapy seeks to help the individual to engage more effectively his/her intellectual system, to heighten objectivity regarding the processes in the relationship system and reactions to changes in the relationship balance.

The therapeutic process focuses on the family of origin of one or both of the spouses. Since problems in a nuclear family are seen to be the result of unresolved undifferentiated relationships in the family(ies) of origin, those problems must be addressed and resolved in therapy for any improvements to occur. The data obtained in the evaluation is used to create extensive family diagrams, which depict the functioning of the extended family system over generations. The therapist may work with either one or two persons involved in the most significant family triangle.

As noted earlier in this chapter, Bowen was disturbed by the transference generally experienced in classical psychoanalytic practice. To avoid that process, the Bowenian therapist is encouraged to maintain neutrality in the presence of the family emotional field

and not be pulled into the process. The therapist, who is seen as "supervising" or "coaching," is expected to focus attention on the relationship processes and steer conversations away from the loaded expressions of feelings and the content of intense emotional issues.

## Conclusion

Because the processes which Bowen Theory describes can be found in all social systems, the theory offers managers and employees some new guidelines for understanding organizational action. As the theory makes clear, individuals, including managers, do not operate as autonomous beings, maintaining rational control over their own behavior. Rather, they are, to a very large degree, influenced and controlled by the behavior of those around them. Circular, rather than linear, causality is the rule. The theory, thus, can increase a manager's appreciation of the complexity of the organizational process which he/she is expected to address.

Using the frame of Bowen Theory also enables organization members to understand the limits of rational action within the relationship system. As the theory asserts, the human feeling system is more often the guiding force in the relationship process than is the intellectual system. Those who recognize and acknowledge this reality of human functioning and who can identify the processes through which the organizational relationship system is created and maintained may have within their repertoire some new and effective ways to approach and influence organizational action.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# METHODOLOGY

## Epistemological Frame

The purpose of this study is to expand the knowledge of organizational decline by using Bowen Theory as a tool for understanding that phenomenon. The methodology employed here uses Pitirim Sorokin's logico-meaningful method as the epistemological frame and device for generating its conclusions. Unlike the positivists, who argue that prediction is the ultimate end of social science research, the logico-meaningful method is associated with the neo-idealistic tradition in sociology, which contends that the purpose of social theory and research is the promotion of understanding. (Sjoberg and Nett, 1968). Theorists from this tradition practice what can be termed "disciplined insight" (Sjoberg and Nett, 1968, p. 291) to build theories that make sense of the social world.

As Sorokin puts it, the logico-meaningful method offers a means of ordering the complex and varied phenomena of the social world. Understanding social systems requires an apprehension and appreciation of their essential unity and integration.

> Hidden behind the empirically different, seemingly unrelated fragments of the cultural complex lies an identity of meaning, which brings them together into consistent *styles*, typical *forms*, and significant *patterns*. *If, therefore, uniformity of relationship is the common denominator of*

> *causally unified phenomena, in the logico-meaningful union it is identity of central meaning or idea.* (Sorokin, 1962, p. 23).

The central meaning infuses all aspects of the system, gives expression and substance to those aspects, and, as such, "makes cosmos of a chaos of unintegrated fragments." (Sorokin, 1962, p. 32).

Developing an understanding of a social system, such as the relationship system within an organization, requires an examination of the three components of social action: "meaning; vehicles through which meanings are symbolized and transmitted; and human agents, who are the creators, transmitters, and recipients of meaning." (Silvers, 1966, p. 3). Empirical referents are readily available for the identification of "vehicles" and "human agents." However, the concept of "meaning" is more complex and is defined on two levels. "Pure" meanings are the subjective or psychic state of the individual. "External" meanings are the observable behaviors which are controlled by the individual's subjective state.

> Pure meaning is...intersubjective when transmitted through external forms. The intersubjective process is described by Sorokin as first, the transformation by an individual of a subjective state to an external symbol (words, gestures, alteration or construction of physical objects, etc.); second, the reception of the respective symbol through organs of perception of a second party; and third, the transformation of the perceived symbol back into the subjective state similar to the first. (Silvers, 1966, p. 3).

Meaningful systems are the accumulations of pure meanings which are dependent on one another and upon the system in which they exist. "These dependent relationships mark the *integration* of meaningful systems, and the degree of dependency is characteristic of

their degree of integration." (Silvers, 1966, p. 4).

One can discover the central principle by using a variety of techniques, including observation, statistical study, analysis, dreams, chance or intuition; such is the "disciplined insight" of which Sjoberg and Nett wrote. The validity of the principle can be determined using two interrogatory criteria: 1) is the principle logical in and of itself and 2) does it pass the test of the relevant facts, that is, does it accurately fit and represent those facts? (Sorokin, 1962).

Sorokin's questions for analysis thus become: how are meanings joined into systems? What is the nature of these relationships? Using Sorokin's methodology and the principles of Bowen Theory, with its emphasis on the relationships among persons within human social systems, it becomes possible to develop a new understanding of how organizational systems come to experience decline as defined in the literature.

## Qualitative Research

In order to focus on the complex processes which exist within organizational human systems, this dissertation research was conducted using qualitative methods. This form of research is best suited when the goal of the effort is explanatory, where the research focuses on explaining the forces behind a particular phenomenon or identifying potential causal networks which shape the phenomenon under investigation. (Marshall and Rossman, 1989). Such an approach to research

> entails immersion in the everyday life of the setting chosen for study, that values participants' perspectives on their worlds and seeks to discover

> those perspectives, that views inquiry as an interactive process between the researcher and the participants, and that is primarily descriptive and relies on people's words as the primary data. (Marshall and Rossman, 1989, p. 11).

A qualitative approach also best serves those researchers who take a holistic view of organizational behavior. That holistic view assumes that the whole is more than merely a sum of the individual parts; any understanding of the phenomenon under study can be gained only by examining its full context. (Das, 1983). Since Bowen Theory is concerned with understanding human behavior within the context of the relationship system surrounding it, a qualitative approach to this dissertation research is most appropriate.

The case study is among the most extensively used methods for social science research. Case studies are, according to Yin, "the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed,...and when the focus in on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context." (1989, p. 13). The method has been criticized, e.g., for its generally small sample sizes, which limit the generalizability of findings or for data collection techniques which may produce non-representative findings. (Das, 1983 and Yin, 1989). However, a qualitative case study provides the most effective means for explicating the complex human relationship processes of organizations that are experiencing or have experienced decline.

## Sample Population

As noted in the Chapter Two Literature Review, the researcher interested in

studying organizational decline faces some significant barriers. Decline, particularly decline-as-cutback, is often not apparent until an organization has ceased to exist. The American emphasis on the value of success often leads those who may be involved in a far less than successful organization to deny the very fact of difficulties to themselves, much less to others. Thus, finding organizations to study and gaining access to them may often be an especially acute problem for decline researchers. The organizations studied in this dissertation were identifiable -- and access available -- because the researcher had worked in each at an earlier period of time.

Three case studies are developed here using the principles of Bowen Theory as the tool for analysis. All of the organizations in the cases -- which are identified by fictional names -- have experienced decline in one of the two senses described by Whetten (1980). The first, the School of Continuing Learning at a state university which was broken apart in 1990, illustrates the concept of decline-as-cutback. The second and third, the Company for Youth, a national, private, non-profit employment and training organization, and the Legislative and Public Information Office of a federal government agency, remain intact but continue to experience periods of upheaval and turnover. These two organizations are used to illustrate the concept of decline-as-stagnation, focusing on "the general climate, and orientation in an organization." (Whetten, 1980, p. 346).

## Data Collection

Two research strategies were used to obtain data for the development of each of

the case studies. The first strategy involved an ethnomethodological approach to fieldwork. As described by Hunt,

> [f]ieldwork is a method of gathering in-depth data about the meaning, structures, moral codes, and social behaviors of particular cultural groups and the individuals who compose their membership. It is characterized by intensive interaction between researchers and subjects. (1989, p. 11).

One essential aspect of the ethnomethodological approach to fieldwork is that "the researcher's self [becomes] the primary instrument of inquiry." (Hunt, 1989, p. 13). All interactions and observations, and hence all the data, are mediated through the researcher and thus necessarily are subjective; "ultimately, the researcher's subjective experience structures the...narrative because it provides the medium through which the raw data is gathered." (Hunt, 1989, 14).

Having been a participant/observer in each of the organizations studied in this dissertation, the researcher became the primary instrument of inquiry in a special sense. Entries from journals developed contemporaneously with participation in each organization were used as a guide for inquiry. The subjectivity developed from that work experience and inherent in the research process is fully acknowledged. A methodological appendix, which is "a statement of...personal experience in conceiving, designing, and carrying out the writing of the research study" (White and McSwain, 1983, p. 300), has been included in this dissertation to recount fully the process of conducting the research endeavor.

The fieldwork is supplemented by the second research strategy, indirect

observations with individuals who are and/or were members of the different organizational systems. Those indirect observations take the form of depth or focused interviews. (Das, 1983; Marshall and Rossman, 1989; and Sjoberg and Nett, 1968). Depth or focused interviews, as described by Sjoberg and Nett, are constructed as follows:

> First of all, the persons interviewed are known to have been involved *in a particular situation*...Secondly, the hypothetically significant elements, patterns, processes, and total structure of this situation have been provisionally analyzed by the social scientist. Through this *content or situational analysis*, he has arrived at a set of hypotheses concerning the consequences of the determinate aspects of the situation for those involved in it. On the basis of this analysis, he takes the third step of developing an *interview guide*, setting forth the major areas of inquiry and the hypotheses which provide criteria for the relevance of the data to be obtained in the interview. Fourth and finally, the interview is focused on the subjective experiences of the persons exposed to the pre-analyzed situation in an effort to ascertain *their definitions of the situation*. (1968, 213).

Following the steps outlined above, the researcher developed a list of persons who were working or had worked for the three organizations to be studied, all of whom could be considered potential participants in the interview process. A hypothesis -- that organizational decline is created by the unconscious psychic and social process of those within the system -- about the development of the organizational situation was considered. A list of general open-ended interview questions which focused both on the relationship processes and organizational life were designed to guide the interview. The specific questions were:

1. Can you think of a metaphor which captures what you think and feel this organization is like?

2. Are there specific events that stand out for you when you think about life in this organization? Are those events typical or unusual?

3. Can you describe a crisis in this organization? What do you recall about it? How did it begin? Who was involved? How was it resolved? Did it occur more than once?

4. How do you feel about yourself in this system?

5. What would you most like to change in how this organizational system operates?

The questions were designed to elicit from the interviewees their own definitions of the situation and their personal perceptions about their and the organizations' relationship system functioning. The interview sessions were to require between one and one-half to two hours.

The researcher negotiated access to individuals in each of the organizations studied. Though the negotiation of access differed in each case, several common parameters were established for all cases. First, those selected to participate were chosen to represent all levels of the organization, from top management to support staff. Second, the interview sample included those who expressed general satisfaction with their organizational experience and those who expressed dissatisfaction. Third, the pool included individuals whom the researcher knew well, those who could most appropriately be considered acquaintances of the researcher, and those whom the researcher met first at the interview itself. Finally, given the nature of the study -- i.e., exploring how

organizations become dysfunctional and/or degenerate into decline -- and the fact that many of the interviewees remain within the organizations being studied, the researcher assured the informants that, as much as possible, their responses would not be identified with specific individuals and that the organizations themselves would not be identified.

Since the School of Continuing Learning no longer exists as a unit, the researcher contacted potential interviewees individually. All except one of those contacted agreed to participate; a total of eight interviews with former members of the School were conducted. Most interviews were conducted at the interviewee's offices; one interviewee canceled her appointment, but did speak to the researcher over the telephone for two and one-half hours.

At the Company for Youth, the researcher contacted the company president to inform him of the research project, request an interview, and establish access to individuals who were employed at the organization. Interviews of current employees were conducted at the Company's offices; six interviews were conducted at that location. An additional four interviews were conducted with persons who had once worked at the Company; those interviews were completed at the current offices of those participants.

Access to the Legislative and Public Information Office created some problems for the researcher. As will be noted in the case study narrative and analysis, the atmosphere of the organization is not one of openness and trust. The researcher's own experience within the organization was not a happy one; she left the organization because the job which had been promised during the hiring process never materialized. Returning

to the organization was not anticipated with comfort. Finally, shortly before the interviews began, the agency's Inspector General launched an investigation into the management practices of the office. Needless to say, this investigation, though precipitated and welcomed by the staff, heightened the tensions and anxiety level of those within the office.

Individual LPIO staff who had been informally contacted regarding interviews requested that the researcher not contact the office management, particularly the Director, to take part in the interviews. They feared that should he know specifically and personally that this study was being undertaken, he would retaliate against any persons he knew or suspected might be participating. Several of the staff indicated that they would not take part in the study if the Director was involved.

The issue of access to interviewees highlights one of methodological difficulties associated with the study of organizational decline. After significant consideration and a review of Sutton's (1989) assessment of the possibility and potential value of including information on non-participants in research studies, the researcher decided to honor the wishes of the informants available and not include the Director or his two closest allies in the study. Consequently, all ten interviews of past and current LPIO employees were conducted off-site.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis was an on-going process through the interview phase of this research

study. The analysis was guided by the advice of Miles and Huberman (1984), who warn that late coding weakens the analysis because it can limit the researcher's opportunities to shape and reshape his/her perspectives through the actual research process and can create overload when the mass of data is approached at one time. To avoid those pitfalls, contact summary sheets were prepared after each interview session.

The contact summary sheets for each interview included demographic information on each participant. They also included a transcription of the researcher's handwritten notes from each session. The transcription summarized the responses of the interviewee to each question, noted other issues raised by the informant's during the session, and included the researcher's descriptions of the interviewee's body language and affect during the session. The ongoing preparation of the summary sheets enabled the researcher to identify emerging themes and to frame potential follow-up questions for future sessions.

The actual coding of data was completed by hand. First, the data was coded descriptively, using a classification scheme suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984, p. 57). That scheme consists of six different categories: 1) acts; 2) activities; 3) meanings; 4) participation; 5) relationships; and 6) settings. Since the intent of the research study is to determine if Bowen Theory can be a useful tool for understanding organizational decline, the data were then associated with codes representing the relationship processes defined by Bowen Theory.

## Case Study Validity

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the case study method is often criticized for its subjectivity and its limited generalizability. In this dissertation, the researcher has openly acknowledged her own essential subjectivity in relation to both the organizations and the research process. The intimate involvement of the researcher in the lives of each of the organizations is a fact unique to this particular study. How then to determine if the cases, as presented, provide an accurate picture of organizational reality?

Sorokin explains that one can claim that the central principle has been found by determining if the principle is "logical" in and of itself and if it fits the facts of the case. In an effort to determine if the researcher's preparation of the cases provides an accurate representation of the organizations' experiences and presents a plausible and logical story of how the organizational processes contributed to decline -- that is, to test the construct and internal validity of the cases -- each case study was given to an interviewee from his/her respective organization to review. (Das, 1983 and Yin, 1989). The reviewers, though sometimes uncomfortable with the depiction of organizational events and processes and with the analysis, were in agreement that the cases as presented provided an interesting and accurate assessment of their organizational life.

# CHAPTER FIVE

# CASE STUDIES

## Introduction

The case studies which follow are descriptions of life within three different organizations that have experienced decline as defined within the organizational literature. The first case study, The School of Continuing Learning, illustrates the concept of "decline-as-cutback" (Whetten, 1980 and Cummings, Blumenthal, and Greiner, 1983). The second and third cases, The Company for Youth and the Legislative and Public Information Office, are examples of organizations which experience "decline-as-stagnation" (Whetten, 1980 and Cummings, Blumenthal, and Greiner, 1983).

Interviews with current and past employees of each organization were conducted during the period April 1992-July 1992. The data gathered from each individual interviewed were not limited to that or any other specific time-frame of their experience within the organization. Nor were questions focused specifically on events which occurred during the time in which the researcher was a fellow employee. The case descriptions, which use the participants' words as primary data (Marshall and Rossman, 1989), are structured to provide the reader with a picture of the patterns of relationship, emotional climate, and typical events of day-to-day life within each organization over a

period of years.

## The School of Continuing Learning

### Background

In late 1987, after several years of lobbying for such a change, staff members at the Division of Continuing Education were delighted to learn that the Board of Trustees had approved the Division's upgrade to become the School of Continuing Learning. The staff believed that this new, more prestigious designation would bring with it increased respect for their operations and enhanced cooperation and support in program development from the rest of the university community. They felt hopeful that the School was now poised for growth after several years of standing still.

Along with the new name came an expanded mission for the School. Staff were expected to develop new and expand current programs to reach the growing market of adult learners through their presentation of on- and off-campus programs. It was expected that expansion of programs would lead to increased headcount of students and revenues. They were also charged with finding ways to integrate their programs more closely with those offered through the rest of the university community and to support more fully the activities of the other schools and colleges within the institution. Though they would not initially be gaining increased staff or financial resources with which to approach their new mission, staff expressed some confidence that they would be able to meet the new challenge.

However, despite their initial enthusiasm and optimism, staff members soon found that their hopes for the future were not being realized. Though they often discussed ideas for new structures and programs at staff meetings, few new initiatives were undertaken and the organization's methods of operating and structure remained as they had always been, separate and apart from one another. Even as they recognized that the pressures for change from outside the school -- from the newly appointed provost, the state's budget crisis, and the more openly expressed avaricious interest of selected deans in their programs and resources -- were increasing, staff was unable to shift from the status quo. What had only recently appeared to be the threshold of a period of expansion soon came to be experienced as a time of crisis and potential organizational demise. In 1990, the once promising future came crashing down. The dean abruptly resigned in June of that year. Shortly after his resignation, the process of disbanding the School began.

Case Data

The mission of the School of Continuing Learning (SCL), a unit within a young and expanding state university, was to provide quality educational and cultural programs for non-traditional learners. The School, upgraded from a Division in 1987, consisted of six program offices and one administrative support office. One program office which had been a part of the division for several years was disconnected from the overall unit in 1988, when the School was renamed and its mission expanded. The six program offices were, in the words of one of its members, "something of a motley assemblage,"

united by the overall mission of the School, serving adult learners. No other academic or administrative department on campus was specifically positioned or staffed to address the needs of the area's large market of adults for degree or non-degree, on- or off-campus programs.

Since its establishment in 1973, the School was led by Dean William Eagles. William, who had been associated with the University since its earliest days as an independent institution, had a tenured faculty appointment in an academic department to go along with his administrative appointment at SCL. Since 1977, he had been supported by Kathy Reed, Associate Dean; she had been ABD in higher education at another institution since 1981. Though she had taken time off on several occasions to work on her dissertation, she had not moved forward at all in completing that project.

William and Kathy were an intriguing pair of opposites. William is from small-town Virginia, speaking with a low Southern drawl. He stands about 6'2", with a lean and rangy build. Kathy, a midwesterner, is just 4'10" and weighs close to 200 pounds. She speaks and moves rapidly, a proverbial bundle of energy. Their personal styles differ markedly -- as does their appearance. Kathy is outgoing and personable, a woman who can usually find the right words to charm. William, on the other hand, is exceedingly awkward, and either "rattles on and on about nothing" or limits his conversation to banal greetings or meaningless cliches.

William and Kathy called SCL a family, a Mom-and-Pop operation. The pair spoke of themselves as a complementary team working together for the good of the

organization. Strains in the relationship were apparent. Kathy had made a name for herself in the larger institution by becoming involved in a range of University-wide activities. She claimed that the School benefitted from the reputation she had built. William said that he was proud and supportive of Kathy's activities, but often complained bitterly to staff about how much time and SCL staff resources her "outside" activities used. He felt she ignored her responsibilities as Associate Dean in favor of her personal interests, leaving him to carry her load as well as his.

> I had a major personnel problem with Kathy that I didn't deal with...She wasn't happy with the Associate position. She wanted to be a super conference person, to be in control of what she did all the time. Managing our personal and professional relationship became a problem. I just didn't deal with it directly at all.

William himself had a fairly negative reputation both inside and outside the School. Several of the Deans of other schools did not speak to him, and staff within SCL were not at all clear of exactly what William did with his time. Kathy herself claimed she was always introduced to people as "the brains of the organization." She was often openly contemptuous of him in public situations inside and outside the School. One staff member described what she and others found to be a particularly egregious example of her disrespectful behavior.

> Shortly after the new provost came on board in 1988, William hosted a party at his home for the provost and members of the SCL staff. As William stood in his living room chatting cordially with the provost, Kathy stood in the nearby kitchen looking out on the scene. Her voice dripping with sarcasm and contempt, she began commenting on how desperately William was trying to get on the provost's good side, how ridiculous he was to think that he was a real dean to be taken seriously by the chief

> academic officer of the school. She was, as usual, very funny as she made her remarks, but there was no mistaking her disdain. Between moments of laughing at her comments, those of us in the kitchen cautioned her to keep her voice down, that someone might hear. She didn't care.

Another staff member commented:

> There was an awful lot of back-biting in the culture. In retrospect, Kathy seemed to foster a lot of that. She was notoriously indiscreet. She was supposedly William's friend and ally, but she put forth info across campus and internally against William. She's the one who warned me that William could be very vindictive if crossed, but I never saw that side of him myself.

Program directors reported to either William or Kathy, both of whom favored a laissez faire style of supervision and management. Both were frequently either out of the office, attending to professional or personal business, or maintained very flexible hours, arriving only just as the staff was leaving. Their interactions with staff were irregular, their involvement and interest in program operations sporadic. They claimed that, having hired competent professional staff, there was little need to "micro-manage" the organization.

The program directors exhibited mixed feelings about working in SCL. To a person, they appreciated the autonomy they had to operate their programs as they saw fit, with little interference from William or Kathy. Two of the program directors specifically stated that they tried as hard as possible to remain removed from the internal dynamics of the School. All of the directors saw themselves as capable professionals, with little need for "adult supervision." Though most saw working at SCL as "just a job" or "a place to be until retirement," each person saw him/herself as hard-working, doing a good

job, and making a contribution to the overall mission of the School.

> Working at SCL wasn't an uplifting experience. You didn't have the usual negatives about a job (e.g., too much supervision or interference), but you didn't feel anything particularly positive either. Maybe that was the result of the real inertial environment. There just didn't seem to be very much of a there there.

Though they liked each other well enough, the program directors generally had little to do with one another. Their programs had operated autonomously over the years. Though there were few common initiatives generated by the School's leadership, the directors often had conversations about how they could produce improved programming or be more efficient if they worked together. They also believed that the School needed to forge a common identity and to develop programs that crossed current program lines. These conversations became more frequent after the School's mission was expanded. Nothing much came from those discussions.

> There never was any cross-pollination between program areas, no cohesion. Everyone was his/her own entity. Staff never really tried to break down the barriers, we were always isolationist. I guess it was just always easier and more comfortable to stay by yourself. It's ironic, but our isolation made it easier later to tear the School apart, and no one wanted that.

> We were a bunch of very different people who were standing under a common umbrella, but we weren't able to move in any one direction. The people holding the umbrella weren't guiding the group; they were just holding the umbrella. The others want to move, but can't agree to walk together.

> I've always been a collegial-type person, working and playing well with others. But here it seems that everyone wanted to work alone, to keep away from each other. Soon, I found myself doing the same thing. I knew it wasn't effective and I didn't like it. But keeping my distance became a part of how I operated there because that's the way everyone operated there. It just became the natural thing to do.

The directors were highly critical of the leadership of the School. They believed that neither William nor Kathy had acted appropriately as either leaders or advocates for the School or its individual programs. They resented bitterly what they saw as William and Kathy's disengagement; they saw their lack of involvement as a major reason for the School's lowly position within the institution.

> William and Kathy saw SCL as their own personal kingdom. They ran it for their own personal aggrandizement, at their own pleasure, for their own convenience. They didn't do much, but basked in the glory of their workers. William spent most of his time trying to protect his job, Kathy doing what she was interested in.

> William and Kathy always operated for William and Kathy. It made me really angry that they got away with that, while the rest of us worked our tails off. They never dealt with you straight. They talked behind your back, played people off against each other. It just wasn't comfortable.

They also disliked what they saw as the pair's continual practice of pitting one office against one another and were uncomfortable with their efforts to draw staff into their up-and-down relationship.

> Cooperative efforts were never really encouraged or discouraged. The personalities at the top encouraged divisiveness. There was always an unstated attempt to create competition, sort of divide and conquer.

> It was so strange. You would be in a meeting with Kathy and all of a sudden she'd go off on how bad a manager, how inept a politician, how dumb William was. In her view, she really was the leader, the one holding the place together. She would try to get you to agree and most times you did. She was a really smart, magnetic personality and William really wasn't that great. The next week you would be talking to William, who would complain that Kathy wasn't pulling her load. He would want you on his side. Then you would be in a meeting with the two of them and they would join together to gang up on you or one would attack while the other sat silently. Then, individually, they would come to you to blame the attack on the other. It made you crazy. You never knew whom to trust, what was going on with the two of them.

However, though the directors saw the leadership as a major problem for the School, they never attempted, either individually or as a group, to address the issue in any direct way.

> How could you address problems that were never really acknowledged? At every staff meeting, William would paint any problems as a function of forces outside the School. No one would contradict him, though we all had to know that wasn't fully the case.

> I've always found it difficult to talk to Kathy. I feel like I can't read her at all sometimes. I've learned from the past that you can never know how things are going to hit her. I've also learned that she can be very biting if you get her angry. I don't know how to react to that. It's just so uncomfortable and upsetting, so I avoid it.

In fact, far from addressing their dissatisfactions directly, the staff frequently rallied to their leaders' defense. Everyone found staff meetings to be a bore and a waste of time, as William would drone on and on without eliciting any response. One program director would even bring coloring books into staff meetings and draw while the session dragged on. It was only when William or Kathy spoke of problems they might be having with their boss, the provost, that the room would come alive. Suddenly, those who had

been sitting on their hands silently would be offering suggestion after suggestion on what they could do to save their jobs.

> I found those meetings to be so odd. I knew for a fact that everyone in that room thought William was a big part of the problem, that everyone wished we had a different leader. I was astounded that William was admitting that he hadn't responded to the provost's directive of several months ago and that now he'd be in trouble if we didn't come up with something. The change in energy level was automatic and palpable. Everyone started offering this idea or that suggestion, everyone was involved and invested. I couldn't figure it out. Why were we all trying to save this guy who didn't really deserve to be saved?

William and Kathy saw the situation somewhat differently. While acknowledging that he sometimes might not have been the best leader, William believed he was doing the best he could to lead and protect the SCL "family."

> There were always major personnel problems with some directors. I tried everything I knew - counseling, coaching, cajoling - to get people to change, to work together more effectively. I couldn't make things better...If other people were unhappy, I never knew it really. My door was always open, but no one came in to let me know what they needed, how they felt. What was I to do?

Kathy also saw problems.

> William was not serving the school well for many years. He wasn't around, wasn't engaged. He always had personality conflicts with the provosts. I did the best I could to mend fences, inside and outside of SCL, but I wasn't a miracle worker. He always called SCL a family, but I wasn't sure if I was supposed to be his wife or his mother...The staff sometimes had an inflated view of their abilities, not very realistic at all. They couldn't think creatively; that became my job. But they resented any push from me to do some different, new things. You just couldn't talk to them about it.

But, despite these negative perceptions and growing pressure from outside the School,

operations continued much as they always had. Programs remained separate and limited, people operated independently, dissatisfactions were not addressed. The equilibrium of the system was maintained.

By 1988, however, it became clear that others were beginning to look closely at SCL's operations. A new provost arrived and told William that she expected him to meet the new missions that had been formulated when SCL was upgraded in 1987. As the University's budget tightened, Deans at other schools began to look longingly at the revenue generated by SCL's programs and the faculty positions the School controlled. Staff members began hearing more pointed comments from other members of the University community about William's and Kathy's frequent absences. Rumors about SCL's demise began to be a frequent topic of campus gossip.

Every staff member retrospectively defined the years between 1988-90 as a period of major crisis for the School. Yet, they admitted that, at the time, no one could acknowledge openly or sometimes even to themselves that the School's future was definitely at risk. To many, those years were an exceedingly frustrating and anxious time.

> Communications and politics were never conveyed to staff about what was going on outside. We were supposed to operate as if nothing were happening. But we knew from outside sources that SCL was in deep trouble.
>
> Changes affecting SCL weren't ever discussed openly. We knew something was happening, but William and Kathy never told us and we never asked directly. We didn't know what was going to happen, if we should do something. The rest of us fed on each other's concerns and

> worries; most of the time we just withdrew further from each other. We never took any formal action.
>
> When the crisis hit and we didn't know what would happen, I kept my distance from the rest of the staff. I felt I couldn't trust anyone, that it was not good to get close to anyone.

The staff, which had always been disconnected from one another, withdrew even further. Doors were kept closed, conversations kept to a minimum. Everyone focused even more intensely on their own jobs. There was little interaction among offices, not even idle chit-chat or gossip. "When you passed someone in the hall, all you did was say hello. Nothing more." Staff members reported that they increased their smoking, gained or lost weight, or started to be subject to more minor illnesses or complaints. They described themselves as feeling angry, threatened, or frustrated, with no outlet for any of those feelings. People were absent more frequently; getting up and coming to work became a major effort.

William admitted that he rarely drew in the staff to deal with the situation.

> I did ask for their help in some projects, but never gave them the big picture. I felt many staff were afraid to change, that they wanted the old times back. There was a good deal of dragging their heels about moving into the future. There was enough reluctance to change evident to the rest of the institution to create the perception that SCL would need a major shake-up to make changes. I constantly heard from outside that SCL was dead...I didn't fully communicate with the staff because I wanted to protect them, not lower the morale further. I never discussed the rumors from outside, but I knew staff knew them.

Fewer staff meetings were conducted, Kathy and William were absent even more frequently than before. Kathy explained her absences by reporting that she had some

mysterious series of illnesses that kept her immobilized. No one believed that she was actually sick, but was just avoiding coming to the office. William just didn't show up. "A very strange kind of quiet seemed to settle over our offices. It was like everyone was already gone," said one staff member.

Ironically, given their negative perceptions about William's abilities as a leader, several staff members looked to him to save the School. Kathy, who had so frequently had negative things to say about William, commented that she

> always saw William as a survivor who was going to protect us all. He had survived so many other episodes when someone was after his head that we figured he'd survive this time, too. If he survived, we'd survive.

Another staff member expressed similar sentiments.

> It's funny, now when you think about it, that we really thought that William would pull this out for us. He and Kathy were never around, they never acknowledged what was going on when they were there. We heard enough rumors from well-placed sources that the School was going to be broken up. The signs were all there. And, for so many years, we had all believed that William was the problem with the School. But now we believed that William could hold it together for us. Talk about wishful thinking!

That turned out to be wishful thinking indeed. In May, 1990, staff were summoned to an emergency staff meeting. No one had any idea of what to expect. At that session, William announced that he had turned in his resignation, effective June 30. He had negotiated with the University's president a sabbatical leave for the following year, after which he would return full-time to his tenured academic position. William had survived, but would the School?

Immediately after William's resignation, Kathy was appointed acting Dean. A few months later, the process of disbanding SCL began when the provost detached several of the programs and assigned their functions to other academic or administrative departments. By the beginning of 1991, all that remained of SCL were a few reorganized programs. Those programs were then reconstituted and designated a "center," with Kathy named as its Director. Offices for the center were moved off the main campus to some townhouses located down the road. The School of Continuing Learning had gone out of existence.

## The Company for Youth

### Background

Anyone observing or interacting with the Company for Youth is immediately struck by the energy and commitment that this organization's members bring to their work serving disadvantaged and at-risk youth. Staff members, under the leadership of the dynamic president, are always pushing for more: more programs, more kids served, more resources, more public attention and recognition for the Company. There is a high-powered, confident atmosphere which conveys the message: We really care about kids and know how to make a difference in their lives.

Yet, when one looks beneath the surface, problems and tensions are apparent. Though the Company is always seeking to expand the number of program sites across the country, the actual number of overall sites has generally not increased. Gains in new programs are often offset by an equal number of losses of current locations. The organization also constantly experiences a high level of turnover in staff. Figures provided by the personnel office indicate that, in the years between 1987 and 1991, which includes years when the economy was experiencing a recession, the turnover was:

| | |
|---|---|
| 1987 | 25% |
| 1988 | 25% |
| 1989 | 51% |
| 1990 | 37% |
| 1991 | 20% |

A significant number of newly hired personnel leave within one or two years, according to the personnel office.

Tensions among staff members are generally felt to be high, with outright conflict a regular feature of organizational life. Problems or dissatisfactions are rarely resolved effectively, but are more frequently buried only to emerge at a later date in more intense forms. In 1988, the organizational tensions erupted into a coup attempt by two of the vice-presidents who, in concert with some members of the Board of Directors, attempted to have the president removed.

Case Data

The Company for Youth, a national, non-profit organization headquartered in Washington, D.C., was established to meet the educational and employment training needs of economically disadvantaged high school dropouts. The Company provides direct services and oversees a network of affiliated organizations across the country. During the first fifteen years of its existence, Company officials were proud to note that it was the only national organization which dealt exclusively with high school dropouts. In more recent years, faced with changes in the funding environment and shifts in public

policy priorities, the Company has moved away from its original target population and has attempted, in the words of several staff members, "to serve any population that someone is willing to pay for."

Just as the external environment has buffeted the organization, so too has the internal environment. Past and current staff members most frequently use words such as "intense," "dramatic," and "personal" to describe the emotional feel of the place. They tell of an organization full of people who often appear to be in a state of personal, interpersonal, and professional conflict and crisis. Those who have worked at the Company over the years describe their experience with the organization with vivid images and strong emotions.

> This place is like a wave in perpetual motion, crashing against the shore. There have been lots of high tides and lots of low tides. Sometimes the wave deluges you with what is going on. Every once-in-awhile there is a low tide which stinks to high heaven. The wave is always different and it's always very deep. It is always dangerous.

> It's a meat-grinder here. There's a constant churning of problems, people, and opportunities. Even the good opportunities, the challenges, are grist for the grinder. The grinder smashes up people and puts them out. The pressure is a constant fact of life which is balanced by successful completion.

> I think the expression 'hell bent for leather' captures the place. We're all the time charging, all the time intense. People come here with incredible levels of dedication, commitment to what they do. The place can use you up and burn you out, but it recharges you, too, when you think you've reached the end of your rope.

Even those who have left the organization retain strong memories of what it felt like to work there.

> It was like a snowball rolling down a steep, rocky slope, out of control. The snowball is unstable, not solid inside like a rock. It's bumped and driven by things outside of itself and by what's been packed inside. You always remember the force and power of the snowball and hope that it doesn't plow you over as it goes by.

Like many non-profit organizations which offer low salaries and demand long hours, the Company has always attracted people who see their work as much more than just a job. Most enter the organization while in their twenties or early thirties. Staff members frequently use words like "committed," "dedicated," or "connected" when they describe how they see themselves and others in relation to the mission of the organization. They relate how they are drawn by the promises of being able to develop themselves, to work in an organization which they expect will practice the developmental and humanistic values it espouses for its clients. The attachment to the organization is, from the very beginning of their association, deeply held.

> The people who commit to work here have a real sense of mission, a real commitment to what the organization is supposed to be trying to do. For almost everyone, there's no disconnection between what they do and who they are.

> I took a large pay cut to work in this organization because I believed so strongly in what it was doing. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't totally irrational; I thought that the job would offer me some real good experiences for my future. But, at the time, I really needed to feel that I was providing a service to my fellow human beings. That was more important to me then than money and the comforts it might bring.

For many past and current staff members, there seems to be a logical connection in their minds about themselves and the organization. Doing good work at the organization means that you are doing good for people. Doing good for people means that you are good.

That commitment, that investment of self, translates into a tremendous amount of energy and enthusiasm for the work of the organization. Other factors contribute to the creation of the dynamic atmosphere. As noted, many of the staff members are of similar age and share social as well as professional interests and proclivities. Also, employees travel frequently on business and attend, several times a year, company-sponsored conferences and meetings where drinking, dancing, and generally "partying-hard" are an accepted and expected way of life.

> There's always been a real electric and ribald atmosphere here. You work hard, you play hard. The pace is always more than you can handle. You're always fighting against the sense that you aren't ever doing enough to help people. You know, the old human service mindset. There is also the expectation set that you will do all you can, that your first loyalty has to be to the Company and the kids. So you work really hard. Then, when it's time to let down and party, you're expected to party along with everyone else. We're all in this together.

While most staff members accept the demands placed on them by the organization, they acknowledge that their participation sometimes takes a toll on their personal lives. Sometimes, they say, there just isn't enough emotional energy to give equal attention to both their job and their relationships. But they feel they can't say no to the

organizational demands.

For the past fifteen years, the organization has been led by Jonathan Black. His second-in-command, at first informally but since 1986 officially, is his best friend, Bill Kennedy. Both were in their mid-twenties when Jonathan assumed the presidency and brought Bill with him, appointing him vice-president of the Company's largest division. The staff, which has hovered around forty persons at the national headquarters over the years, has generally been structured into several divisions, each headed by a vice-president. Over the years, there has been regular and significant turnover in those positions, as well as throughout the rest of the organization.

While he often states that he believes in and practices participatory management, Jonathan clearly is at center-stage in the Company. He exhibits two distinct sides of his personality to the staff. He can truly be a charismatic leader - highly intelligent, decisive, personable, capable of exhibiting great warmth and passion for the staff and the kids they serve. Jonathan often makes the point that he tries to manage from the heart. Yet, he can also be a distant, intimidating, authoritarian ruler who explodes with a bad temper when someone makes a mistake or doesn't do what he wants. The contrast between the two sides of his personality can sometimes be so great that the staff experience a real sense of dissonance. They don't know what to expect. Yet, they continually look to Jonathan for guidance and support.

> Jonathan was the focal point for all action in the organization. It seemed like every decision - big or small - had to go through him. There was a real excitement when he was around, when he was socially and professionally engaged. When he's not been around, we seemed to flounder, morale would drop.

Jonathan agrees that staff members have always looked to him for many things.

> They expect just about everything. They want me to raise money, be nice to them, provide a vision, give them lots of attention (time and contact). I guess those demands are reasonable. Sometimes I've met them, sometimes not. I don't think that the staff perceives that I have met their needs.

Staff acknowledge that they look to Jonathan for professional and organizational leadership. While they believe that they have valuable knowledge, experiences, and skills to lend to any discussion or decision-making process, they also admit that they will tailor their comments to what they think Jonathan wishes to hear or defer quietly - though not always happily - to his decisions.

> Because Jonathan has the final authority on many issues, people try to figure out how to shape things for his approval. There is danger there for both the organization and the individual. It's funny, in a way, because sometimes you get the sense that Jonathan really respects only those people who challenge him, at least a bit.

Though many of the staff express strong opinions and feelings about what the mission of the organization is or should be and disagree with the directions Jonathan has taken, few have been willing to raise those objections directly to him.

> People don't often deal directly with Jonathan because of fear of reprimands or pain that can come from dealing directly. People are not comfortable being straight. He takes control and makes decisions because people are afraid to make decisions on their own.

Even when staff do express their opinions, Jonathan still is often able to exert control. As an example, during one of the organization's management team meetings, the group conducted a lively and sometimes heated discussion about the merits of responding to a particular request for a proposal. Most of the staff members were opposed to investing the time and effort into a proposal that was clearly outside the organization's area of expertise. After the arguments had been laid out, Jonathan called for a vote. Those opposed to developing the proposal were in the majority, but Jonathan summed up the meeting by saying that the votes were in and they were going to do the proposal. He then quickly adjourned the meeting. All but two staff members quickly picked up their papers and left the room.

> The two of us looked at each other and asked: 'What just happened here?' Everyone saw the vote, everyone knew we had decided not to go ahead with the project. But when Jonathan confronted us with his reality, a reality which conflicted with what just had happened, no one said a word. Now we were going to have to do this proposal that no one really wanted to do. And, of course, it never got funded. That kind of thing seemed to happen often.

Staff also look to Jonathan for personal validation. They admit that they are often anxious to obtain his approval, receive his personal strokes, become recognized as one of his stars. The self-esteem of staff members has often been bound by the character of

their relationship with Jonathan.

> There was a tremendous focus around Jonathan, an emotional component. His approval was critical. Hearing him say 'you're smart, you're worthy, you'll go far' was what most of us wanted - needed - to hear. You tried real hard not to screw up, because he could be wicked when you did. He'd cut you right off.
>
> There's a constant over time of people looking for Jonathan's approval, looking for psychological needs to be met. People will fight their 'siblings' for that. You see temper tantrums, incredible emotional reactions. The competition between people for attention is intense. It's hard not to see parallels to behavior in families.

Staff members pay close attention to who goes in and out of Jonathan's office, who is seen going out to lunch or for drinks with him, or who gets complimented or recognized for doing a good job at staff meetings. Speculation about who is the latest favorite circulates regularly around the office. It seems that everyone wants to be the favorite, to be close to Jonathan, and feels uncomfortable when it appears that someone else is emerging as a star. The rumor-mill quickly becomes active to cut people down to size and re-level the playing field.

In most instances when staff have professional or personal disappointments, differences, or problems with Jonathan, they express those dissatisfactions not to him but to other confidantes in the organization. The same is often true when staff members have difficulties with each other. Unfortunately, confidences rarely remain confidential. The pattern of communication about conflicts or issues, whether with Jonathan or with others, is almost always indirect, and comes to encompass large segments of the Company.

> The gossip within the organization is amazing. There's a lot of personal networking. People spend an amazing amount of time doing nothing but gossiping. It all feels, every issue, phenomenally important at the time. It's a wonder any work ever gets done.
>
> It doesn't take many people to create a crisis from a minor problem. It could just take two to start the ball rolling. When people aren't thinking effectively, which happens often, problems escalate. There's always an undercurrent of crisis. Few get nipped in the bud by people dealing directly with the issue and/or the person involved.

Jonathan himself sometimes plays a role in the creation of inter-staff conflicts. He may confide to a staff member about a problem he is having with the staffer's supervisor. He lets the staff member know that he appreciates the difficult position he/she might be in, having to deal with a boss who doesn't quite get the big picture of what is supposed to be done or can't communicate clearly to the staff member what Jonathan or the management team talked about. But he would also often refuse to try to solve the problem by including the staff member in meetings with the supervisor and himself. And, of course, his comments to the staff member are meant to be kept confidential.

Staff identify several types of events which can trigger organizational crisis. As with many non-profit organizations, funding is always an issue and a potential crisis. Despite its ability to survive for many years, the Company is always living on the financial edge. Whenever it appears that funding is threatened, emotions run high. Information and rumors begin to transmit throughout the organization from one small

group of staff to another. Staff members express the feeling that they never quite know what all the facts are, even though Jonathan conducts meetings to get out the "full story."

> We've developed a rumor control discussion at full staff meetings, but it's not fully used by staff. They are embarrassed to talk in front of the whole group. You can really feel the tension, the emotion, when something is going on. But it's hard to really deal with it because no one will acknowledge that it's there.

Real or imagined problems can create distress throughout the organization. One long-term staffer describes the time when the Company was about to announce a major new project. Discussions about what to name the project had been going on for quite some time. Suddenly, someone mentioned that the name which had finally been selected was similar to that of an organization he thought he had just read about. That organization, he recalled, was a right-wing, thought-control oriented group; the article which he had read mentioned a television program that had just featured that group in a negative broadcast. Staff members at the Company were appalled and fearful that their project would be associated with this other awful organization. Quickly, the Company became engulfed in hysteria.

> Lots of people were 'oh-my-Godding.' Everyone was convinced that this was a disaster. No one sat down to get information about the article or program or organization. No one assessed the real potential for damage. It turned out there really wasn't any, and the project was named as planned. But this knee-jerk reaction, the hysteria where people get caught up in their own knowledge or fears, is how we operate.

Personnel actions also generally create upheavals. Promotions and raises, most

of which are either made or approved of by Jonathan, often are followed by a period of organizational conflict. Some of the conflict can be understood as a function of the fact that career ladders in a small organization are limited. Thus, one person's ascent means lost opportunities for others. A larger part of the conflict, in the view of staff, stems from the view that these personnel actions are a sign of Jonathan's favor and approval, that they create greater access to him for the beneficiary of the action than is available to others.

> The competition for attention never ends. People are afraid to deal honestly with one another because they're afraid of giving away an advantage. There's no such thing as shared success, either personally or work-wise. so people don't share information, they don't deal directly with personal or work problems. There's no trust, no cooperation, no teamwork. There's just conflict.

One particular promotion, made back in 1986, to this day causes anger and discomfort. In that year, Jonathan promoted his friend Bill to the newly created position of senior vice-president. One senior staff member, who departed the organization shortly after that promotion, described the staff reaction:

> No one liked the decision. Few had respect for Bill, we felt he was quite limited. His only qualification was that he was Jonathan's friend. There was no way that we were going to let Jonathan put Bill between us and him.

She went on to discuss a senior staff meeting held shortly after the promotion was announced, a meeting where the top managers viciously attacked Bill in front of Jonathan, a meeting where many of the participants ended up in tears. Bill describes that meeting

as well.

> That session was like a revelation for me. It was very ugly. The senior managers saw my new role as distancing them from Jonathan, even though the role wasn't defined to do that...What was really amazing, though, was how they started attacking me for decisions I hadn't made, meetings I hadn't conducted, things I hadn't done. Jonathan had done all those things. I realized later that I was like a lightning rod, that I received the negative projections from staff about Jonathan. They couldn't let themselves be angry at him, so they took it out on me.

Despite numerous changes in staff over the years, despite the fact that staff recount things about Jonathan and his behavior which deeply trouble them, and despite their dismissive attitudes about Bill's capabilities, to this day, Bill retains his role as lightning rod for negative projections. For example, after one staff member had ranted on for several minutes about Jonathan's over-controlling nature and his sometime lack of willingness to listen to diverse ideas, she went on to say:

> Bill is really the problem, not Jonathan. Jonathan is more open to change. Bill sets the tone that you have to please Jonathan and people follow suit. Too much time is spent trying to please 'father,' and Bill is the big brother enforcer who sees that it happens. It's all his fault.

Departures from the organization are not easy for individuals or the Company. Sometimes people literally disappear overnight, with no official explanation given as to their departure. The gossip network is activated when the departed employee contacts someone still inside to rail against Jonathan or another staff member. Or, even stranger, nothing is said about those who have left. It's like a great secret which cannot be exposed.

Jonathan himself does not take kindly to departures he hasn't pushed for himself. Several former employees tell of how he attacked them personally and unmercifully when they told him of their plans to leave.

> It was like I had personally betrayed him by leaving to take a better, higher-paying job. He told me I was stupid, that I was making the worst decision of my life, that I'd come crawling back. 'Where was my loyalty?' It was awful, it was devastating. I had to really work hard to re-establish my relationship with him after I had gone...I know he didn't do this just to me. There were always stories of people who'd been blasted as they left circulating in the place. Yet, surprisingly, many stayed in touch with him as I did...My boyfriend handled it right. When he went in to tell Jonathan he was going, he gave Jonathan's speech for him! He told him that he knew he was stupid, ruining his life, blah, blah, blah. Jonathan was so flabbergasted, he just sat there stunned. Then he laughed. They parted on good terms.

The most serious organizational crisis cited by several staff members is what is called "The Great Coup of 1988." At that time, two of the vice-presidents, working in conjunction with members of the Board of Directors, attempted to have Jonathan removed. It was rumored, but never confirmed, that at least one other former vice-president who had left the organization earlier that year was also involved in the effort. The vice-presidents, through the Board members, levelled charges against him ranging from incompetence to financial and personal malfeasance. The battle went on for several months as the Board hired an independent consultant to investigate the charges. As one staff member recalled, it was a horrible time.

> Everything that was bad about the organization came to the fore. You had to choose sides. The fear and concern people had about their jobs and themselves normally escalated into paranoia. There were tons of rumors and tons of secrets. You were so afraid of pissing anyone off - no matter what side they were on - because you were afraid of getting hurt. Not just losing your job, but of getting emotionally hurt. It was like watching a family tear itself apart.

The investigator contacted people who had left the organization as well. Heated conversations were exchanged between former staff members and between former and current employees who argued about which side they should take in the battle. Even those who had left the organization found that they could not remain outside the conflict.

> When I think about it, I find that the emotional reaction to this internal problem was rather bizarre. After all, we were gone from the organization, we no longer had any real stake in what happened. We weren't at risk for losing our jobs. But most of us just could not stay detached from the conflict. It felt like we were still working there, the level of emotional interest and investment in the process and outcome was that high.

Eventually the Board investigator found that the charges could not be substantiated and Jonathan was kept on as president. The two vice-presidents who had been involved left the organization; the Board members who had participated also resigned. The organization slowly regained its balance. As Bill puts it:

> The two vice-presidents who started the coup were always problems. One wanted enactment of his vision, the other wanted more attention from Jonathan. They got together on their anger...The organization recovered from the crisis when the 'losers' left, one voluntarily, the other by being fired. The crisis helped bond the members of the organization so the losers were isolated...That really was the worst time. We've always had

> trouble over time getting everyone to march to the same beat. We've often had to bring consultants in for help with teambuilding and communication. How you fit in with team play is the criteria for making it in this organization. Always has been, always will be.

Since the "Great Coup," the company has continued as it always has. Staff have come and gone with frequency, battles have broken out over everything from claims of sexual harassment to the uncovering of financial mismanagement to disputes about promotions. The energy - and the personal angst - which have always characterized the place remain in evidence. As one long-time staff member says:

> There's a timelessness about the issues here. I've seen a lot of tides and I've seen a lot of floods. Over time, there's been a lot of beach erosion. There's always struggles with funding, always struggles with competition between staffs and divisions and between people. The faces change, but the dynamics don't. I guess it will be like that till the day we close the doors.

## Legislative and Public Information Office

### Background

For many members of the staff in the Legislative and Public Information Office, particularly those who work in the Public Information branch, the past several years have been quite unsettling. Within a period of around six years, that branch has been led by six different permanent or acting directors. No director has held that position for more than two years. The succession process has, on some occasions, been involuntary and, in all instances, has been an unhappy one.

The turnover in top management personnel has been accompanied by frequent reorganizations of the office structure and personnel. Within a one-year period, 1990-1991, three separate reorganizations were conducted, planned and guided by the director of the entire office. Few of the reorganizations have been reported as official restructurings to the agency personnel office, but staff job descriptions and reporting lines have been changed nonetheless.

The constant change in office management and structure adds uncertainty and discomfort to a unit where the level of tension and distrust is already high. Staff members who are new to the office are quickly indoctrinated by the veterans as to whom they can trust, what kind of conflict and problems they can expect, and what form of

displacement they might experience if they rub the director the wrong way. Many of the newer staff members leave the office within a period of one-year. Longer term staff members are often half-heartedly seeking new positions and express frustration and unhappiness with their professional situations.

Case Data

The Legislative and Public Information Office (LPIO) is a staff unit to the Director of a small, scientifically-oriented federal agency. The office is composed of around thirty professional and clerical employees; are all members of the career civil service, with the three top managers members of the Senior Executive Service. In its most current configuration, the office is composed of two branches, Legislative and Public Information. The largest section in the Legislative branch is responsible for representing the agency before Congress. Supporting that function are two smaller sections, one of which prepares speeches for the agency director and other personnel, while the other works on programs and initiatives geared toward the states. The Public Information branch is divided into several sections, with staff serving as press officers and newswriters, producing annual and special publications, developing educational and promotional films, and managing special projects which promote math and science education.

For many staff members, working at LPIO has been far from a pleasant

experience. They use strong language to describe their feelings about working there.

> The best image comes from a dream I had. This place is like a small, polluted pond. There's lots of damaged little fish floating around. There's this big fish that has taken bites out of the little fish. There's a drum of toxic waste leaking up from the bottom. It's a dangerous, poisonous place.
>
> There's a real climate of fear here. People are insecure and they are living in fear.
>
> You feel like a rat in a cage on a wheel, operating in a closed-in cell. You feel like you're working on a chain gang - you keep your head low.
>
> The office saps your energy away. It's a pernicious environment. You spend a lot of time and emotion trying to keep from getting caught up in the latest conflict of the day. You go home at night and you're just exhausted. If you can't get out, you just try to survive.

Even those have found their experience to be on the whole positive admit that LPIO is not always an easy place to work.

> It's like a real pressure cooker. You're under pressure all the time to come up with interesting and innovative ideas. If you're not, you're not doing your job...A lot of the pressure is internally generated, but you always get the feeling that Larry [the office director] is saying 'What have you done for me lately?'...I've never discussed these perceptions with others in the office, but I guess it's what others feel. We just never verbalize the feelings.

The office is managed by Larry Goze, who has been Director for more than nine years. Though they acknowledge Larry's competence in handling the intricacies of the budgetary process on the Hill, many of the staff are critical of him as a manager. His experience and primary area of interest has always been in legislative affairs, and he

devotes most of his attention to that side of the office.

Staff members on both sides of the office believe that Larry's singular focus has some problematic effects. A member of the Legislative staff comments:

> It feels really strange to me that there is so much that I don't know. If you asked me what people on the Public Information side do in any specific sense, I couldn't tell you. It's particularly strange for two reasons. We're not a big office; there just aren't that many different functions or people. And there really is overlap in what we do, the functions do support each other. There's just very little positive or productive interaction.

The reaction is more intense and personal on the Public Information side, where staff members feel neglected, unappreciated, and unimportant.

> Larry is not really interested in public information. Legislative is what is important, it's what counts for the agency. The rest is just window-dressing, it's not essential to him. So he doesn't really pay attention to us. We don't get his attention or concern or favor. But he won't let us go. You feel completely demoralized.

Staff also find Larry to be a distant, manipulative, and perhaps even underhanded figure who plays favorites and dances on the edge of ethical behavior. Though his manner is quiet - he speaks in very soft tones which are often difficult to hear or understand - there is little question that staff believe that he controls and dominates the office and their lives. One high level manager, who was in the office for only a short period of time, observes:

> The start of the senior staff meetings gives you a picture of what the office was like. Everyone would silently troop into Larry's office on Monday mornings. He would be sitting in one of his big easy chairs, ignoring

> everyone while he wrote God-knows-what in his little black notebook. No one would say a word. Finally, Larry would close his book, look up, and say 'good morning.' The meeting could then begin. My efforts at humor or talking before Larry 'officially' opened the meeting weren't taken well by anyone. It was a ritual which confirmed that we had no standing as individuals until he gave it to us.

Larry frequently exercises his control over the office by reorganizing functions and personnel. Few of these reorganizations are officially registered with Personnel, even though people end up with widely different job descriptions from those under which they entered the office. He also uses the personnel process "creatively", as he puts it. He brings in people with the promise of a particular job but often abolishes their positions or changes their responsibilities if he decides they don't fit into his plans or if he chooses to emphasize another function in the office. He rarely consults with those staff who are effected by the changes. In the absence of direct information, rumors about pending changes -- the reasons for the change and the impact on individuals or units -- spread around the office. The rumors and constant changes in personnel and structure leave staff feeling unsettled and threatened.

> We're in a constant state of turmoil. So many people have left unhappy or disillusioned. The turnover creates a crisis, with people talking about what happened this time. Those that stay are unhappy, disillusioned, and insecure. They can't seem to find any good way to cope.

Long-term employees offer their assessment of the impact of Larry's style and actions.

> There's a pervasive atmosphere of intrigue and secretiveness. Larry doesn't share except with a few favorites why you are doing something. You feel like you are always in the dark, with no sense of clear or honest purpose.
>
> There's a sense of underhandedness, that what Larry is doing is deceitful. I'm not sure if that is true, but he often creates the impression that what he is doing won't survive the light of day, whether it's a personnel action, contracting, or a strategy for working with the agency divisions...I have the feeling that we're always engaged in some type of illegal activity, but I don't know what it is. It's hard to lead a life of principle in this place, to have any sense of integrity.

Staff members also report that Larry has little or no tolerance for mistakes within the office. One staff member talks about the time a news story was released to the press earlier than Larry had wished. Although the story was not released by a member of the LPIO staff, but, rather, was disclosed by the program office which controlled the project, Larry wanted to review the notes of a meeting when the original public relations plan and news release date were discussed. He wanted to determine who on his staff had been there, who had not effectively controlled the program office.

> Larry's view was that someone had screwed up. When you screw up, you get punished. That's his style of management. It's also become the style of management and interaction within the office. Everyone is quick to point fingers. That wasn't my style, so that's another one of the reasons why I left.

Because they perceive Larry to be all-powerful, manipulative, and punishing, staff members are reluctant to talk with him directly or honestly about their professional or

personal issues, interests, or responsibilities. They fear that he will become angry or displeased if they disagree with him. They feel that they must always be on guard in discussions about themselves or their work. They perceive themselves to be powerless to effect the dynamic between themselves and Larry in any way.

Though they admit that they are rarely effective, staff have a few preferred strategies, used singly or in combination, to deal with their sense of powerlessness. They may remain silent and cede all power and authority to Larry, allowing him to make decisions about work-related projects and sometimes their very jobs without saying a word. The assumption behind this strategy is that Larry will always win in the end, so why go through the trouble to fight the battle?

One staff member describes a meeting which illustrates this staff reaction to Larry. Several staff members who were working on a project met with Larry to discuss related program and budget issues, to bring him up-to-date on the status of the effort. In planning and discussions prior to the meeting, the group had developed a very detailed and clear outline of how they planned to proceed with the project. They were confident that they knew what was required to complete the project successfully.

As the meeting started, Larry asked a few questions about whether certain elements had been included in the plan. The team leader answered that those elements had not been included and began the presentation. Those listening were struck by the tentative and questioning manner in which the presentation was being made. The team

leader, who only moments before the meeting had been coolly and confidently discussing the project, now sounded unsure and uncommitted to the plan's design. When she finished, Larry began offering his own suggestions and plans. The original outline, which the team had worked on for several weeks, was dropped without discussion. The team left the room, charged to start over again. The staff member described the team's reactions.

> We were just crushed and angry, too, mostly at Larry. We'd spent all this time and energy planning and we didn't even get a fair or full hearing. I know we didn't present ourselves well or speak up for what we'd done. We just let him take over. That wasn't unusual. You didn't feel like you could discuss things with him, express your own point of view. That's not a good feeling.

Similarly, a staff member whose job Larry changed without any prior discussions comments:

> You always feel that you are selling yourself short or that you're selling out in order to survive. I feel like I have to play it safe. I've lost some confidence, had to put a cap on who I am. I feel like I have lost something and that the organization has lost something, too. Lots of my motivation is gone. You never feel good about yourself.

Thus, ceding their personal power and authority leaves many staff with lowered feelings of self-esteem.

For those who do not wish to remain absolutely silent but who prefer not to approach Larry directly, another strategy is to meet with Frank, who serves as something of an ombudsman in the office. People feel comfortable with Frank, a long-time

employee who seems sensitive and offers a sympathetic ear. They also believe that he relays information directly to Larry. Talking to Frank enables staff to vent their feelings of anger or dissatisfaction with Larry's actions without forcing them to face him directly. That this strategy also enables Larry to avoid addressing their feelings or the substance of their issues seems irrelevant or escapes their attention.

The most favored strategy, particularly for those in Public Information, is to expect their supervisors to act as their protectors, to assume responsibility for improving their lives in LPIO. They hold particularly high levels of expectation for whoever is sitting in the branch chief position. As one recent incumbent in the position notes:

> Staff had expectations of a savior when I came in. They didn't trust or get along well with Larry. I needed to massage a lot of people, give them someone to dump their troubles on. But whenever I tried to do anything, make changes I thought would make the office a better place to work, they would rebel against me. They would complain that they were overworked, that they didn't want me to cut off access to Larry if they happened to have it, that they didn't need supervision, but wanted me to 'take care of them.' Some would even run to Larry to complain about me. I couldn't win.

The observations of a long-time staff member confirms his experience.

> There's always been something funny about the supervisors here. They're supposed to be the good guys, but their nurturing has allowed a lot of deviant behavior. People expect them to be buffers against Larry, but don't think twice about undercutting them and running to Larry when they want to. It's almost like they don't really want things to get better, to change. Maybe that's why we've gone through four branch chiefs in a little over four years.

Staff members report feeling disappointed and angry when their supervisors don't

provide the protection they believe they need. Sometimes they will blame Larry for not letting the branch chief succeed in that role. In other cases, they will blame the branch chiefs themselves. Though the branch chiefs have been dissimilar in experience, character, and style, staff members will point to personal deficiencies of those individuals as reasons for their failures. Yet, every time there is an anticipated change in leadership in the Public Information section, staff express the same expectation and hope that this time the right person to take care of them will be hired.

Staff members complain not only about Larry, but also about each other.

> There's no real camaraderie or teamwork here. You couldn't get four people in LPIO to join together on anything. You have highly quirky people who are not communal. They won't help themselves or each other.

Staff object to attending staff meetings, where information might be shared, or to working with others on projects. Each person tends to see what he or she is doing as the most important function in the office. There is little cohesion or sense of common purpose. One former branch chief finally gave up on holding staff meetings because there was so much grumbling and dissatisfaction about having to attend. But he then started hearing complaints from the same people who grumbled that they did not know what was going on in the office, that they felt disconnected from the unit.

There is also a high level of distrust and suspicion among staff, as well as a pervasive belief that people are in competition with one another for attention and favor from Larry.

> There is always unhappiness and gossip in the office. Lots of backbiting, undercutting of people. Few have anything good to say about Larry, but boy, do they try to get his favor and attention. People would run to him to complain about what someone else was doing. You felt like you couldn't trust what anyone said. They would stab you in the back in a minute.

There is a sense, at least among some staff members, that Larry isn't the only reason why the office is so "negative and dysfunctional."

> Larry's a convenient peg to hang your dissatisfaction on. People blame him for everything instead of taking responsibility for themselves. That doesn't do anything to change the office dynamics.

It is, however, difficult even for those who see the office problem in broader terms to figure out how to change the way the system operates.

> If it isn't just Larry, if it isn't just getting in the right branch chief, if it is all of us, how do you get started in making everyone act differently? We all feel as if we have been beaten down for so long that there's not much here to work with. And we are just not very good now at interacting together.

Indeed, staff do not demonstrate much experience or skill in interacting well together. People tend to spend much of their time in their offices with the doors closed. When they do emerge and interact, the results are often negative. A conflict can arise over just about anything. Some conflicts arise when external pressures - a change in leadership in the agency, a demand from Capital Hill for action, a negative story in the press - raise the activity and tension level throughout the office. More frequently, however, the conflict arises from the internal dynamics of LPIO.

> People are often at each other's throats, over what you never know. Larry may be pissed off over someone's performance or manipulating someone, which creates a crisis. One staff member may be angry with another. People don't deal directly with one another. They form into little camps. Rumors and tensions spread quickly from camp to camp. People spend a tremendous amount of time gossiping and complaining.
>
> Sometimes the competition or perception of favoritism between legislative and public information triggers an inter-office crisis. People get into fights, the level of hostility goes up, people don't talk to each other. These kinds of fights happen more often than they should.
>
> There are people there who are insecure, chronically unhappy, temperamental, or just plain miserable in the environment. Most see themselves as never responsible for anything bad that happens. It's always someone else's fault. Given those personalities and the office climate, it's not surprising that people are always fighting with one another.

Conflicts are rarely resolved, because staff are either unable or unwilling to address directly the root cause of any problem or issue they may have with others.

> It feels too difficult emotionally to go to someone and say, 'Look, I have a problem with what you said or did.' It's just easier, in a strange sort of way, to stand in the middle of the office and scream at someone or see the entire office blow up than act in an adult fashion. We seem to have lots of practice at that.

After a period of time, overt hostilities will cease, and the tensions underlying the hostility will be re-absorbed into the office atmosphere. Then, it becomes only a matter of time until the next full-scale battle breaks out.

> This place reminds me of the Balkans before World War I. There's always some in-fighting and skirmishing, some intrigue. Tensions are always high. Then - bam - there's the triggering event which brings everyone into the fight, which brings on the crisis.

Another -- and to date the most serious -- office-wide crisis recently arose. Many of the elements of the crisis are familiar to office staff. The conflict began in the spring of 1991 when Larry decided again to reorganize the office and remove the current Public Information branch chief, Tom, from his position. Larry told Tom that his style wasn't right for the office, and that he had not been able to improve the morale or operations of the branch in the year he had held the position. He even brought on board a new employee whom he planned to install in the branch chief position once Tom was removed. As word of the impending change spread throughout the office, the pace of work activity slowed down, nerves were frayed and tempers flared frequently as staff members reacted to yet another restructuring.

This time, however, the crisis has not followed the familiar script. Rather than accept his demotion and leave the office as others had done, Tom decided that enough was enough. He would not accept what he considered to be an unfair personnel action which could seriously damage his career. Tom took his complaints to the agency leadership and the Inspector General's office.

> When I started this job, I had just come off my intensive SES training at Harvard. We'd done a lot of case studies there. I immediately saw that this place was worse than any we had looked at in books. The morale was low, everyone was unhappy, no one would stand up for themselves in any positive way. I tried to make that different, but obviously was being shot at from above and below. But, even though I hadn't been able to do what I'd hoped within the office, I certainly wasn't going to be pushed over a cliff unfairly. I had to fight.

As Tom began his battle, a few others in the office assessed their positions. The new staff member, Jim, who had been hired to replace Tom decided that LPIO was not the kind of environment in which he wanted to work.

> I realized soon after I got there that the job I expected was not going to be the job I would get. I'd just assumed during interviews with Larry that I would have authority and responsibility, but found that wasn't the case. There didn't seem much point in asking him about that...I also realized that most of the staff members themselves, as unhappy as they were, were not going to change. I couldn't figure out why they weren't leaving in droves. Luckily for me, I was able to find a way out quickly. I was able to 'escape' after only six months.

Jim's decision to leave the office so quickly caught the attention of the agency Director. Another long-time staff member contacted the Director to outline what she saw as the long-term management and personnel problems within the office. After several months of review, the agency Director canceled the reorganization, which included Tom's demotion, and ordered the Inspector General to investigate Larry's management practices. The investigation began in early 1992, shortly before the interviews for this case study began.

Not surprisingly, staff morale has plummeted as the uncertainty over the structure and even the future of the office has lingered. Staff remain wary about the conduct and outcome of the Inspector General investigation. Few in the office will speak openly to each other about whether or not they have been interviewed or what they might have said. They observe that Larry has begun to take some action to change his management

style, but they remain cynical about his motives and the possibilities for real improvement.

> It's a terribly uncomfortable atmosphere here now. Larry is on coals, he's under the gun to be a better manager. But it's all a sham. Whatever he does he is doing just to protect himself. People are still not honest about what they think and feel, they're still sycophantic to him. Nothing is going to change.

Jim, commenting from the security of his new job, observes:

> There's no question in my mind that there is something seriously wrong with LPIO and that Larry is a big, big part of what's wrong. But I also feel that the staff is a part of the problem, too. They just reacted to Larry, couldn't seem to take any action on their own. I blame those who can't seem to find a way out of what they describe as a miserable situation. Until everyone realizes that, nothing much is going to happen, no matter how many IG investigations you have.

# CHAPTER SIX

# CASE ANALYSIS

## Introduction

As noted in Chapter Two, approaches to organizational decline as cited in the literature can be classified into two primary categories. Theorists who argue from the population ecology perspective believe that the causes of decline are found in the external environment. Others assume what can be called a management-oriented approach, which focuses on the failures of managers to respond effectively and appropriately to changing or problematic conditions faced by the organization.

The case analysis which follows looks at organizations as human systems to offer a third, alternative explanation of the forces which lead to decline. This approach uses the basic concepts of Bowen Theory, which assumes that dysfunction is the result of an ineffective relationship process within the human system. For organizing purposes, this analysis will be divided into three sections which correspond to the research questions posed in Chapter One:

1. What is the basic balance of the relationship system in each organization?

2. What are the primary relationship processes evident within each system?

3. How do these processes combine to create organizational decline?

## Basic Balance of Relationship Systems

Each of the case studies presented provides an overview of life within an organization over a period of several years. While each organization experienced often significant changes in personnel, mission, resource allocation, etc. during the years involved, nevertheless they offer examples of two important principles which underpin Bowen Theory. First, relationship systems, be they families, organizations, or other social systems, will tend to develop their own balance or equilibrium. Second, those relationship systems will work continually, in self-correcting ways, to maintain the basic organizing principles -- the principles by which they have sought to maintain their equilibrium, no matter how dysfunctional -- of their existence. (Friedman, 1985)

This section of the analysis describes the basic nature of each system along three dimensions which emerged from the data. Those dimensions are:

- Organizational Emotional Field
- Leadership as Identified Problem
- Indicators of Decline.

The analysis briefly describes the basic nature of each system and highlights the similarities and differences among them.

Organizational Emotional Field

From the words of members of each organization studied, it is possible to identify what might be called an "emotional field" which is both created by and surrounds the relationship system. The field can be thought of as the climate of the system, one which conveys a sense of the system's energy and emotional content and intensity. In each, the specific character of the emotional field has remained constant over time and has become an important characteristic of the basic balance of the organizational relationship system. The "value" of the field can be discerned by examining the metaphors and the words the participants use to describe their own and other's personal investment and experience in their respective organizations.

"Powerful" and "intense" are terms which describe the nature of the emotional fields at both the Company for Youth and LPIO. Individuals from both groups perceive their organizations as powerful forces which operate seemingly independently of those who comprise the systems. They use strong language to describe the feelings and energy which they bring to their organization and which the organization evokes in them. No one expresses indifference to or feels unaffected by the nature of the field.

Yet the character of the fields in the two organizations differs notably. At the Company for Youth, the field is experienced in primarily positive terms, with some negative aspects noted. The metaphors employees use convey the high level of emotional

and physical energy captured and emitted by the organization. They see the climate as a function of the nature of the work, serving others, and the individual commitment and investment that employees bring to their jobs.

> I think the expression 'hell bent for leather' captures the place. We're all the time charging, all the time intense. People come here with incredible levels of dedication, commitment to what they do. The place can use you up and burn you out, but it recharges you, too, when you think you've reached the end of your rope.

The field at LPIO is similarly perceived as intense and powerful, but is described in primarily negative terms. The system of the organization is seen as "polluted," "pathological," and "sick." Few of those interviewed express any personal emotional investment in the nature of their work or the agency mission. Their energies are dedicated to surviving, in whatever way they can, the "contamination."

> This office saps your energy away. It's a pernicious environment. You spend a lot of time and emotion trying to keep from getting caught up in the latest conflict of the day. You go home at night and you're just exhausted. If you can't get out, you just try to survive.

In contrast, those who worked at the School of Continuing Learning display little affect or energy. Their words, or lack thereof, seem to indicate that they felt that there was not much of an emotional field within the organization.

> Work at SCL wasn't an uplifting experience. You didn't have the usual negatives about a job (e.g., too much supervision or interference), but you didn't feel anything particularly positive either. Maybe that was the result of the real inertial environment. There just didn't seem to be very much of a there there.

Though employees express the belief that the work they did serving adult learners was valuable and regret that there is no longer an institution dedicated to that special population on campus, the majority feel no great personal loss or disconnection as a result of the School's demise. Their emotional investment was and remains devoted to their individual functions and to having a job until they are ready for retirement.

Leadership as Identified Problem

In analytical models which do not employ systems thinking, problems within an organization are often traced to the functioning or dysfunctioning of one particular person. As noted previously, the management-oriented decline literature assumes that problems within an organization are a result of the failures of the manager to manage his/her people and unit effectively. Those models assume that changing or "curing" the managers, either through replacement or training to improve managerial skills, will alleviate problems within the organizational system.

An approach using Bowen Theory, however, operates under different assumptions. Bowen Theory examines the functioning of the system as a whole; the manager is considered a part of that system. He/she does not operate autonomously or control the behavior of the rest of the members of that system, but, rather, acts in response to what is happening within the rest of the system; the manager's actions are a reflection of the actions of the system as a whole. While changes in the behavior of managers are likely

to evoke changes in the behavior of others within the system, those managerial improvements on their own may not be sufficient to cure the system. Bowen Theory suggests that the problems lie not just in one individual's functioning, but in the functioning of the entire system. A focus on only one element in the system ignores the problems or issues within that system which may have contributed to the leadership problem in the first place.

It is clear from the words of participants in all three cases studied that the vast majority see the problems they and their organizations experience primarily as the fault of the top manager. When asked the question "What would you most like to change in how this organizational system operates?" practically every respondent identified "leadership" as the element most in need of change. A few responses to that question illustrate the point.

> School of Continuing Learning: If the leadership at SCL had done more or shown more vision, the problems might not have existed. The Dean should have been more creative, taken more action, made things happen.
>
> Company for Youth: Jonathan has got to change. He's got to stop playing favorites, falling in love with people. He's got to spread decision-making throughout the organization, give up some of his control.
>
> LPIO: Larry needs to change. He needs to lower his style of managing. He now has total control over everything. All people can do is try to please him.

For these respondents, it is the leader who has the power and the sole responsibility for ensuring the effective operation of the system. It is the leader who is

charged with enunciating a vision and guiding group members toward enacting that vision. It is the leader who is supposed to protect them from internal and external enemies, conflicts, or threats. He is the one who is to provide them with attention and concern not only about their job performance but also for their emotional needs and personal lives. It is the leader who is to create and maintain a positive and productive climate within the organization. In their estimation, the problems each organization experienced or is experiencing are a result of the leader's failure to meet some or all of the above responsibilities. They believe that they, as employees, have little ability or responsibility to influence any of these areas. It is interesting to note that the two top managers interviewed - the Dean of the School of Continuing Learning and the President of the Company for Youth - generally agree with their employees that the responsibilities outlined are a part of their management portfolio. As Jonathan puts it:

> Staff expects just about everything from me. Raise money, be nice to them, provide a vision, give lots of attention (time and contact). I see the demands as reasonable. Sometimes I've met them, sometimes not. I don't think the staff perceives that I've met their needs.

They see, as do their subordinates, that they, almost entirely on their own, are or have been responsible for whatever happens to the organization.

> William: I wish I could have been a more effective leader, been more creative, more proactive. I felt I couldn't fight the battle anymore and needed to save myself. I made a decision to resign by calculating my own self-interest. When I left, there was no one to fight for the school's interest. If I had stayed, the place would probably still be around.

> Jonathan: We're about to change big-time with TQM. We're moving to that because I've been converted to the philosophy. I know that the move means I'll have to change my own behavior. Power is fun, control is fun. I don't like giving up those things. This is a big risk...I don't know if the staff can handle the responsibility.

There are, however, a few respondents from the Company for Youth and LPIO who see the organization's problems not merely as a function of leadership failures. They identify elements within the relationship system of the office for, at the least, contributing to the problems experienced. For example, one employee at LPIO notes that people have abdicated their own personal power for taking action or influencing change.

> Larry is a convenient peg to hang your dissatisfaction on. People blame Larry for everything instead of taking responsibility for self. That doesn't do anything to change the office dynamics.

Employees at the Company for Youth believe that staff have become too invested in obtaining approval and attention from Jonathan, that they need to regain their own sense of identity separate from him.

> People have to learn to stand up for themselves, to be comfortable with who they are. People have grown complacent with decisions being made under the watchful eye of Jonathan. People will have to learn how to take responsibility, not to always be protected.

Indicators of Decline

As noted previously, two types of decline are noted in the organizational literature. First, decline-as-cutback looks at reductions in an organization's workforce, budgets, etc. (Whetten, 1980) The term includes within its parameters those

organizations that have gone out of existence. The School of Continuing Learning fits within this category of decline.

The second category, decline-as-stagnation, is more general and includes a variety of phenomena such as retrenchment, crisis, and decline. Here, the term is used to focus attention on the "general climate, or orientation" (Whetten, 1980) within a particular organization. The Company for Youth and the Legislative and Public Information Office are considered within this category.

An examination of the interviewees' descriptions of events and patterns typical of organizational life in both places is used to fill in what constitutes "the general climate or orientation" of decline. Though the organizations themselves differ in many ways, they share features which can be considered indicators of decline.

Participants in both organizations point out patterns of behavior or events which they believe lead to the loss of their own and the larger system's productivity. Employees from both organizations perceive that there are high levels of staff turnover which they experience as having a negative effect on morale and operations. The constant turnover leaves remaining employees feeling overworked, as they attempt to assist those at the bottom of the learning curve or take on extra duties created because of position vacancies.

Employees from both organizations view the turnover problem as having two different aspects. First, in both cases, staff believe that a significant number of new

employees enter and exit very quickly, often within the period of one year. They also find it difficult to have to adjust continually to new colleagues, only to see those people move on voluntarily or by being ousted. A comment by an LPIO employee sums up feelings of people from both organizations.

> Sometimes you just don't want to take the trouble to get to know a new person. It's difficult when they come in, size up the place, and decide to cut their losses quickly and go. They seem able to get out of an unpleasant situation in a way you can't. Others get forced out. Sometimes that's okay, because the fit just wasn't right. But other times it's done for other reasons and it's very ugly to see.

The second aspect of turnover relates to longer-term employees who make decisions or feel forced to leave. Though the rate of turnover for long-term employees is much higher at the Company for Youth than at LPIO, departures from either organization are often unpleasant for both the employee who is leaving and for the rest of the group members. As described in the case, Jonathan often angrily dresses down Company for Youth staff who choose to exit, leaving them feeling depressed and guilty.

> Jonathan was really angry, really pissed off when I told him I was leaving. He was particularly mad because he'd recently promoted me. I'd never told him I was planning on leaving. I think he felt like I'd betrayed him. I tried to tell him the reasons why I was leaving, but he didn't want to hear them. Nothing was done when I left - no goodbye party or any recognition. He should have done that for me. I was very hurt that he didn't and that no one else stepped forward.

Larry, at LPIO, also rarely acknowleged people who were moving on. The departing staff member and those remaining report feeling unvalued and unappreciated, both of

which affect their work.

Many staff who left either organization express the feeling that they got out just in the nick-of-time to "save their sanity." Their feelings are well-known and frequently shared by those who remain. Employees who stay find their morale lowered as others get out and they don't. They question themselves as to why they cannot find the resources to get themselves into a better situation. They feel stuck, unable to change their lives or enjoy their work.

Interviewees from both organizations note that staff members spend an enormous amount of time gossiping or talking with others. The comment "It's amazing that any work ever gets done" was made by several persons from each group. Employees use these conversations for several purposes: to vent their feelings about conflicts with others or the office leader, to gain allies to their side in an interpersonal conflict or office issue, or to attempt to make sense of the office dynamics. Whatever the purpose, it is clear that a significant amount of time is spent away from truly work-related tasks. As employees from both the Company for Youth and LPIO say:

> You have got to wonder how much we could really accomplish, how productive we could be if we didn't have all this extraneous activity going on.

Productivity is also limited or lost when staff feel unable to make decisions about their work. In both organizations, employees believe that practically every decision must first be approved by either Jonathan or Larry. They are reluctant and, in some cases,

truly fearful of taking responsibility for their own work, even for relatively routine activities. Having to wait for approval from the top not only damages the self-esteem of workers, but also slows down the process of work activity itself.

High levels of interpersonal conflict are also apparent in both the Company for Youth and LPIO. Tensions between individuals and units within each organization frequently escalate into overt conflict which quickly engulfs the entire office. Competition for attention and approval from Jonathan or Larry is a regular feature of life in each system; the competition is intense and creates distrust among employees on both personal and operational levels. A statement from a long-time Company for Youth staff member captures what happens:

> The competition for attention never ends. People are afraid to deal honestly with one another because they're afraid of giving away an advantage. There's no such thing as shared success, either personally or work-wise. So people don't share information, they don't deal directly with personal or work problems. There's no trust, no cooperation, no teamwork. There's just conflict.

Staff members report frequently feeling on edge, waiting for the next explosion, living afraid that this time they will be the target.

The high levels of interpersonal conflict are matched by high levels of intrapersonal conflict and stress. Employees from both organizations report that their work lives are exacting a toll on them personally and professionally. They experience emotional and physical symptoms, including increased illness, sleep disruption,

exhaustion, increased conflict in relationships outside work, and loss of motivation. Many find themselves feeling trapped and unhappy, unable to summon personal resources to change their situation. "Paralyzed" is a word several people use to capture their feelings. They find it difficult to devote the kind of attention to their jobs which they feel those jobs either require or deserve. A significant percentage of the interviewees believe that their self-esteem has been damaged, and they are deeply distressed by that recognition.

For many interviewees who have left either organization, time and distance have enabled them to develop some perspective and to regain a positive sense of self.

> I was very distressed and angry when I left LPIO. I'd never had an experience like that before. I'd seen from the beginning that this was not a great place, a feeling that was constantly reinforced by what the veterans there said and the manipulations and fights I witnessed. But I always thought I was smart enough and good enough to weather any storm. Luckily, I was able to get a new job immediately and have been very successful. I've been able to analyze what happened there and learn from it. The problem wasn't totally me - it existed long before I got there and lasted after my departure. But it's hard to see that when you're stuck in a system which is so depressing and defeating. You're not an independent agent.

## Primary Relationship Processes

In this analysis, the concepts of Bowen Theory are used to examine the processes through which dysfunction develops and is supported within organizational relationship systems. The theory does not seek to provide cause and effect explanations for emotional interdependencies within the organizations, but, rather, "describes and defines the

complex patterns of interrelatedness in emotional systems." (Hall, 1981, p. 183). Organizational decline is seen as the result of an ineffective process within the relationship system.

The discussion which follows will examine five interrelated processes which work within the three organizations under study. The five processes, which were discussed previously in Chapter Three, are:

- Differentiation of Self
- Individuality/Togetherness Balance
- Triangles
- Underfunctioning/Overfunctioning
- Chronic/Acute Anxiety.

Differentiation of Self

In Bowen Theory, the process of differentiation has three components. First, it includes the degree to which an individual develops and maintains a solid sense of identity, even in the face of pressures from the surrounding relationship system. Second, differentiation refers to the ability of an individual to maintain a separation of one's emotional and intellectual systems, and thus to act on the basis of logical thinking rather than merely react on the basis of emotion. Third, it refers to the level of emotional fusion or "stuck-togetherness" which exists among members of the relationship system.

Individuals who are able to maintain their own sense of identity, to distinguish between thinking and feeling processes when acting, and remain emotionally connected to others without being consumed are considered to operate at higher levels of differentiation. Those individuals who are guided more by the thoughts and values of others, who are more emotionally reactive, and who bind most of their energy in relationships with others can be considered to function at lower levels of differentiation. Though it is not possible to assign a specific level of differentiation to each individual in the organizations studied, it is possible to assess the general level of differentiation within the relationship systems by reviewing the data provided by the interviewees.

Bowen Theory asserts that well-differentiated individuals are those who demonstrate high levels of solid-self, which "is made up of clearly defined beliefs, opinions, convictions, and life principles." (Jones, 1980, p. 46). Solid-self is built slowly over time and is internally consistent. Those principles are not compromised or changed by pressures from others, but are maintained and used as a guide for intellectual action and decision making.

In contrast, those who function at lower levels of differentiation function from their pseudo-self.

> Pseudo-self refers to knowledge and beliefs acquired from others that are incorporated by the intellect and negotiable in relationships with others. Pseudo-self is created by emotional pressures and can be modified by emotional pressure." (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 103).

Decisions and actions are made based more on feeling than on intellectual reasoning.

In all three organizations, the comments of the interviewees provide evidence that their functioning within their respective relationship system is more pseudo than solid. In each case, individuals report finding themselves acting in ways which appear antithetical to their reported basic belief systems. It is clear that they react to pressure from those around them to accept a common standard of expectations or behavior in order to remain in contact with the group, even if they believe that common standard to be inappropriate or ineffective for themselves or the organization. A comment by a staff member from the School of Continuing Learning illustrates the pseudo-self at work.

> I've always been a collegial-type person, working and playing well with others. But here it seems that everyone wanted to work alone, to keep away from each other. Soon, I found myself doing the same thing. I knew it wasn't effective and I knew I didn't like it. But keeping my distance became a part of how I operated there because that's the way everyone operated there. It just became the natural thing to do.

Lower levels of differentiation are also associated with higher degrees of emotional reactivity among members of the organizational relationship system. In reactive systems, the social process is guided more by feelings than by thinking. Those within the system then find reasons to explain why they acted as they did, to make sense of their behavior.

Evidence of reactivity can be found in all three organizational systems. Staff members at the School of Continuing Learning report their responding automatically to

try to protect William and Kathy when they perceived them as being threatened, even though they thought the pair were ill-serving the School. When faced with the knowledge that the School was in imminent danger, they persisted in counting on William to act as their protector. They acknowledge retrospectively that that expectation was clearly misplaced given the information they had and their own assessments as to the quality of William's skills and performance.

At the Company for Youth, emotional reactions rather than reasoned response seems to be the rule. When asked "What is a crisis in this organization?", a long-term staffer relates what he considers to be a typical example. Just as the organization was naming a major project, someone read an article about a television program which mentioned negatively an organization which carried a similar name. People within the Company immediately panicked, fearing that the negative organization would be associated with the Company. A full week of upheaval ensued, with people running around in hysterics.

> Lots of people were 'oh-my-Godding!' Everyone was convinced that this was a disaster. No one sat down to get information about the article or program or organization. No one assessed the real potential for damage. It turned out there really wasn't any, and the project was named as planned. But this knee-jerk reaction, the hysteria where people get caught up in their own knowledge or fears, is how we operate.

Similarly, at LPIO, people tend to respond to events and each other on an emotional rather than thinking level. Staff report that almost any event or interaction can

escalate into a crisis for the individuals involved and the office because the level of emotion is always so high.

> People are made desperate by the insecurity of the system. Desperate people do desperate things. People react, they don't think, they don't discuss, they just react.

Finally at the Company for Youth and LPIO, the emotional energy of staff members is fused within their relationship systems. At the Company for Youth, so much of the individual staffer's sense of identity and worth is bound into their relationship with Jonathan. His attention and approval is seen as critical to their sense of well-being. Many expend their energy trying to modify their thoughts and behavior in an effort to obtain his good regard and favor. The fusion of staff members at LPIO appears to be driven more by fear of incurring Larry's anger. They see their own personal range of action or power as limited by what they know or assume to be his preferences or desires. They do not feel able to be their own true selves, but feel, as one employee put it, that they "have to put a cap on who [they are] to survive."

Individuality/Togetherness Balance

Bowen Theory asserts that two counterbalancing life forces -- individuality and togetherness -- are at play within the relationship system. Individuality is that force which guides a person to act as an independent, self-determined, and responsible individual. The togetherness force leads one toward others and "is derived from the

universal need for 'love,' approval, emotional closeness, and agreement." (Bowen, 1975, p. 277). In any individual or group, the interaction of the two forces exists in a state of balance which is continually adjusted as people within the relationship system consciously and unconsciously monitor and change their own behavior in reaction to that of others.

An optimally functioning relationship system would have a 50/50 balance between individuality and togetherness. A well-balanced system, composed of people whose level of differentiation enables them to be in contact with others while maintaining their own solid self, provides sufficient flexibility for the system to respond to changing circumstances.

> The level of stability, cohesiveness, and cooperation in a group is affected by the interplay of individuality and togetherness. The capacity of groups of people to be closely and cooperatively involved is influenced by the capacity of individuals to follow their own directives and by the degree to which individuals are oriented by the directives of the group. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 65).

Not all systems, however, operate at the perfect balance.

The three organizations studied offer examples of relationship systems in which the norms are not at the 50/50 balance point. In the School of Continuing Learning, there is little evidence of the togetherness force at work. Those interviewed make the point over and over that there was little connection among members of the unit. When the institutional environment was stable and non-threatening, they were unable to connect with each other to increase organizational effectiveness. When the School was

threatened, they were unable to come together either to try to save the unit which they thought had value or to provide each other with emotional support in a difficult time. In fact, when threatened, several indicate that they tried to keep even more distance. Ironically, their isolation from one another made it easy for the provost to pick the School apart, an outcome that no one wanted.

At the Company for Youth, staff members invest a significant amount of their energy into the relationship system, tipping the balance here toward the togetherness force. For many, the need for affirmation from Jonathan, the desire to be close to him is the force which drives their actions. Other pressures for togetherness permeate the organization: the expectation that people will always give more than one-hundred percent (100%) to their work, that they will actively participate in the sometimes rowdy, often heavy drinking social atmosphere, that they will "march to the same beat" as everyone else, that they will be on the "right" side when a conflict like the "Great Coup" erupts. Several interviewees comment that they find it difficult to be their own selves in a place which demands that you give so much of yourself to the organization and its work.

Staff members at LPIO also find it difficult to "follow their own directives." They respond to what they perceive as pressure or threats from Larry by modifying their personal behavior and work activities to produce the results they know or think he wants. They gain little sense of security from their relationships with each other; they distrust and cannot count on others for cooperation and support. It is a difficult situation for

many. They cannot find safety in the group nor can they find comfort in themselves.

Triangles

An emotional triangle is created when anxiety increases in a two-person relationship. One of the relationship partners then brings in, or triangles, a third person as a way to relieve some of the pressure or anxiety centered in the original relationship. The anxiety, which was originally confined to two people, now can be diluted by involving three people. The issue which originally created the anxiety is rarely resolved through triangling, but the anxiety and discomfort are diminished, thus enabling the original two-person relationship to regain its equilibrium.

Meanwhile, the third party who is triangled in now has to deal with the anxiety transmitted to him or her from the original twosome. He/she may now experience difficulties in his/her relationship with the member of the original pair who did not bring him/her into the problem. In many instances, his/her anxiety will now spill over into a relationship he/she has with another, creating interlocking triangles. Soon anxiety, which originally was confined to two people, spreads throughout an entire relationship system.

There are a few ways that the development of interlocking triangles can be avoided. The original twosome can choose to deal directly and non-reactively with whatever issue arose to create the discomfort within the relationship. The third party who is contacted by a member of the original pair can maintain contact but not permit

him/herself to be drawn into taking sides or attempting to fix the problem the pair experience. If the third party cannot help but become triangled, he/she can keep the anxiety transmitted and not pass it on to others. Unfortunately, people are not always able to do these things.

In all three cases, interlocking triangles are a common feature of organizational life. Conflicts or problems between individuals are rarely dealt with directly by those involved. Instead, parties to a problem generally pass on their anger, hurt, dissatisfaction, etc. to a third person. Soon, almost everyone in the entire organization has some word, however distorted it might be, on the conflict, feels some pressure to make a judgment or take sides, or feels a degree of anxiety emitted from the people originally involved. Examples of effective interpersonal communication, of constructive confrontation, are hard to find in the data.

The top managers in each of the organizations are just as likely to be members of triangles as are staff. At the School of Continuing Learning, both William and Kathy would triangle in others when tensions rose between them. Those staff members triangled in report always feeling very uncomfortable, wondering if they were being manipulated by one or the other to gain some advantage or if they were expected to offer suggestions on how to resolve the problem. No one felt able to remain uninvolved. Jonathan often complains to a staff member about his/her superior, leaving that staffer unsure as to where his/her loyalty is expected to be placed. Often, they feel strangely

honored that Jonathan will confide in them. Larry frequently allows staff members to talk about issues or problems they might be having with their supervisors, creating triangles among the employee, supervisor, and himself. Triangling, whether consciously or unconsciously used, acts as a powerful tool for destablizing some relationships and stabilizing others within the organizations studied.

The relationship system LPIO offers an illustration of the triangling phenomenon at work. Consider the two-person relationship between a staff member and Larry, the office director. When tensions arise in that relationship, the staff member often turns to whomever is currently director of Public Information for support and assistance. The staffer transfers his/her anxiety and responsibility to the supervisor, whom he/she expects to deal with Larry about the problem. The staff member is thus able to regain the equilibrium in his/her relationship with Larry. However, the director of Public Information, the outsider in the two-person relationship, is rarely able to resolve the problem and ends up with a weakened position in relation to both parties. When tensions arise between a staff member and Public Information director, the staff member will frequently go to Larry to complain. As a result of this continual triangling, problems are rarely resolved and change is frequently blocked. Given these dynamics, it is not surprising that the there has been such high turnover in the position of director of Public Information over the last few years.

Underfunctioning/Overfunctioning

The systems approach emphasizes the interrelatedness and interdependencies that exist among individuals within a system. Individuals do not exist as autonomous beings, but

> ...have less autonomy in their emotional functioning than is commonly thought...people function in ways that are a reflection of what is occurring around them. They have precious little autonomy from their environment. The thoughts, feelings, and behavior of each...member, in other words, both contribute to and reflect what is occurring in the [system] as a whole. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 9).

Within a relationship system, people assume different functioning positions which operate in reciprocal relationship to one another.

Most typically seen in relationship systems are overfunctioning and underfunctioning. The overfunctioning individual assumes responsibility and takes over to compensate for the real or imagined inadequacies of others. The underfunctioning person feels incapable or reluctant to undertake certain activities and thus becomes dependent upon the overfunctioning person to assume those roles or tasks. While underfunctioning and overfunctioning can sometimes contribute to the operation of the system, they can lead to system breakdown when they remain fixed. When functioning positions are immutable, there is little flexibility in the system to react to change.

The data provide evidence of underfunctioning and overfunctioning in all three organizations. In all three, the top managers assume the overfunctioning position,

claiming responsibility for much of what goes on in their organizations. That responsibility extends from the most significant functions - fighting political battles with institutional rivals (William) - to the most mundane, everyday tasks - choosing a color for a conference brochure (Jonathan) or reviewing the buffet menu for a function (Larry). William and Jonathan justify their involvement in two ways. First, they see the role of protector as a legitimate management function. Second, they question the ability of their staffs to assume responsibility for certain functions or to respond appropriately to changing conditions.

Staff members respond to their leader's overfunctioning by underfunctioning. They abdicate their personal power for action, avoid making decisions, or keep alternative ideas or opinions to themselves. Absent direction or action from their leaders, they feel unable or unwilling to act on their own.

There are both operational and personal consequences to this pattern of underfunctioning and overfunctioning. On an operational level, the overfunctioning leader ends up cutting himself off from organizational resources which might make his job easier. William acknowledges that he did not inform his staff of the problems he and the School were facing, nor seek their assistance in dealing with those difficulties. After the fact, he recognizes that they might have been able to help change the course of what happened. Jonathan admits that he made some mistakes which might have been avoided had he been willing to get or listen to input from staff for some of his decisions. On a

personal level, both leaders speak about the burn-out, the exhaustion they feel from carrying the full weight of organizational responsibility on their shoulders.

The underfunctioning staff pay a price as well. Personally, they feel that they have little control over their work lives and little ability to influence change. Their self-esteem, their sense of competence is diminished when they must seek approval for even mundane items or when their ability to make decisions or assume responsibility is restricted. Operationally, they find themselves more and more unwilling to express their ideas or try new things. They feel that they and the organization stagnate. A comment by a staff member from LPIO gives a picture of what staff feel.

> It's not a creative time, hasn't been that way for awhile. I don't feel like I can come up with ideas on my own or do anything except what Larry wants. He's not always right, but who's to tell him he's not? No one here, that's for sure. So, we either do it his way or the way it's been done forever. A great challenge, huh? Sometimes I think I'll simply die of boredom.

Chronic/Acute Anxiety

Anxiety is the force which drives the functioning of the relationship system. The lower the level of differentiation within an individual or group, the less that individual or group is able to adapt effectively to stress. When the stress within a system remains high and its adaptiveness low, the capacity of the system to function will be impaired and decline may result.

Bowen Theory distinguishes between two different forms of anxiety, acute and

chronic. Acute anxiety is experienced in response to a real threat to the relationship system and is generally found to be time-limited. Examples of acute anxiety taken from the cases might be a loss of funding for the Company for Youth, the threat from the provost to take action against the School of Continuing Learning if its operations do not change, or a demand from the Congress that the LPIO staff provide a rationale as to why an agency program budget should not be cut.

Chronic anxiety arises in response to imagined threats and can continue indefinitely. It can be activated by any number of forces. Once chronic anxiety becomes felt within a system, it generates its own momentum and continues independently from whatever event might have sparked it. Within a relationship system, chronic anxiety is fed by people's reactions to a change in the balance of the relationship system.

For example, acute anxiety may arise because of the threat of a loss of funding from a major donor. The threat is real and will either be realized or dismissed with the passage of time. The organization will experience a change in its relationship system as it responds to that threat. Chronic anxiety is generated when people begin reacting to the change in the balance of the system, e.g., becoming more non-disclosing to or uncooperative with others whom they may perceive to be in competition for jobs in what may become a smaller-budgeted organization or becoming emotionally reactive to and upset by changes forced by the threat to funding. "Acute anxiety is fed by fear of what

is; chronic anxiety is fed by fear of what might be." (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, 113).

It is important to note three other features of chronic anxiety. First, anxiety can be highly infectious within a relationship system. Distress experienced by one person can quickly be felt and spread to others who are sensitized to the first individual. Second, the lower the level of differentiation within a relationship system, the less able is that system to adapt effectively to stress. Finally, when anxiety becomes chronic, the system is likely to develop symptoms of dysfunction or decline.

Chronic anxiety can be seen as a feature of life in all three organizations studied. During the years prior to 1988, when the School of Continuing Learning became threatened, employees evidenced low levels of anxiety about the operations of the relationship system within the organization. They expressed some concern and discomfort about the fact that they were unable to work together more effectively, experiencing some dissonance between how they thought they should work and how they were actually willing or able to work. They also felt angry at and dissatisfied with William and Kathy, whom they saw as taking advantage of them, and were uncomfortable in their dealings with the leadership pair. Yet, for the most part, staff were able to manage their anxiety in their compartmentalized system and carry on with their jobs.

However, when the School became threatened, the level of anxiety within individuals and the system increased dramatically, and, over the two-year period from 1988-1990, became chronic. Staff members describe how all of their previously

expressed emotions -- concern, anger, dissatisfaction, discomfort -- intensified. In the face of uncertainty about their futures, they found it difficult to concentrate on their work or be motivated to complete regular tasks, much less plan for the future. Several of the staff members describe how they increased their smoking, gained or lost weight, could not sleep, took more sick days, or became more withdrawn over the time period. Though almost all were protected by the state's employment system, they imagined the worst, that they would lose their jobs and be unemployed in a bad job market. Yet, while staff indicate that they were frantically trying to figure out how they could save themselves and the School, they were unable to take any action either individually or as a group. The only one who was able to act was William, who negotiated a special position for himself with the university president.

Staff members at the Company for Youth indicate that they feel anxious most of the time. Funding is always an issue at a non-profit organization, and there have been several occasions over the years when it appeared that the organization would lose its major support. Though most of the periods of acute anxiety were relatively short-lived, the concerns about funding are always there just under the surface.

The greater amount of chronic anxiety within the system stems from the intense emotional investment individuals have for their work and their relationships with Jonathan. Many have difficulty separating themselves from what they do. When the Company fails to achieve or live up to the ideals they brought to the job, the staff

members become disillusioned, hurt, and angry, not just with the organization, but with themselves as well. Others talk about how the demands of the organization can overwhelm them and take over their lives. They sometimes come to feel inadequate both in their professional and personal lives.

The desire to gain Jonathan's favor and/or the fear of incurring his displeasure are on-going sources of anxiety for staff members. Their self-esteem rises and falls based on Jonathan's response to them; since it is not always possible to predict what his response will be in a given situation, staff are left with feelings of uncertainty about who they should be or how they should act. Because winning Jonathan's approval is seen by staff as a zero-sum game, they often feel uncomfortable, distrustful, or resentful of each other. All of the above noted responses and feelings increase the level of anxiety within the system.

The level of chronic anxiety within LPIO is also high. As noted, the organization frequently experiences changes in personnel and structure. Each change -- or merely the knowledge that change might occur -- leaves staff feeling uncertain and threatened about what will happen to them. Though all but the very newest employees have some job protection under civil service rules, most staff feel they have no control over their jobs or work lives and nowhere to turn if Larry decides he wants to alter the office or their positions in any way.

As at the Company for Youth, LPIO staff members' sense of personal security is

tightly tied to their perception of their relationships with Larry. Most staff do not feel comfortable in their relationship with him, finding Larry to be distant, literally and figuratively difficult to understand, and manipulative; those people live in constant fear that they will do something wrong and displease him. If and when they do, both their jobs and their sense of self-esteem are severely damaged. Those who attempt to alter their personal style or values in an effort to please him find themselves feeling just as uncomfortable, for they worry that they have compromised their integrity.

The sense of distance between individual employees is an additional source of chronic anxiety. There is little support or teamwork among members of the office. There is also little sense of trust; "it is difficult not to feel anxious when you don't know if the person you're confiding in today won't stab you in the back tomorrow." The expressions of constant uncertainty, isolation, distrust, and insecurity all paint a picture of a chronically anxious system.

## How Organizational Processes Combine to Create Decline

Using the concepts of Bowen Theory, organizational decline can be understood as a function of an ineffective relationship process within an organization. The previous sections of this chapter discuss and describe the nature of the relationship processes of the three cases. Two of these processes are critical for precipitating decline: degree of anxiety and degree of differentiation. At lower levels of differentiation, the systems have

less ability to adapt effectively to anxiety. When anxiety intensifies and/or becomes chronic, the relationship system develops symptoms, or indicators, of decline. This section of the analysis summarizes how each of the organizations came or comes to experience decline.

School of Continuing Learning

For many years, the staff of the School of Continuing Learning operated in a disconnected manner. Independence and autonomy, on both a personal and professional level, were the primary values within the relationship system. Though all members of the School recognized a need for enhanced coordination and cooperation among the units, they were never willing or able to act upon that recognition and better connect with each other. The staff believed that any movement for change had to be initiated and guided by the leadership of the School. The leadership pair believed that the staff were resistant to and incapable of responding to any effort to change.

When the external environment changed in 1988 with the appointment of a new provost and the designation of an expanded mission, the School was faced with a new challenge. To achieve its new mission, the School would need to adopt a new, more collaborative and creative model of program functioning. Business as usual would no longer be acceptable.

The level of anxiety within the School rose rapidly. Though the extent of the

pressures faced was not acknowledged openly or directly by the leadership, it is clear that everyone on staff understood the seriousness of the situation. Yet, the staff remained unable to draw together to address the new demands in any positive or productive manner. In fact, the patterns of behavior that had been only mildly problematic before -- the disengagement of the School's leadership, lack of communication, isolation and disconnection among staff members -- became even more pronounced. Though no one on staff wanted the School to be dissolved, no one was able to initiate any action which might have prevented such an outcome. The system was effectively paralyzed.

As staff members saw it, the only hope for the School lay with William; "...he had survived so many other episodes when someone was after his head that we figured he'd survive this time, too. If he survived, we'd survive." Staff persisted in maintaining this hope even in the face of their own and other's assessments of William's failures as a leader and the knowledge that the problems facing the School were larger than him.

Ironically, the staff's belief turned out to be partially correct. William indeed did survive, but the School did not. Staff members were trapped by their own ineffective relationship process. The relationship system within the School, which had managed to function in times when anxiety was low and pressure from outside minimal, had no flexibility and thus was unable to adapt to changing circumstances.

Company for Youth

Working at the Company for Youth has always been an intense experience for staff members. Those who join the organization bring a strong sense of commitment and personal investment to the work. They come because they believe that it is important to try to help people improve their lives, that it is their personal responsibility to try to make the world a better place. Who they are and what they do cannot be separated.

Once they enter the organization, many staff members find themselves investing a great deal of the emotional energy into their relationship with Jonathan, the Company president. Their assessment of their own value, both as individuals and to the organization, is closely tied to Jonathan's assessment. If he affirms them, their self-esteem rises; if he criticizes or ignores them, it falls. Staff feel great pressure to be what they perceive Jonathan wants them to be, to do what they assume he wants them to do. To fit in, to be a member of the team, to be on the "right" side of issues are critical values for the organization. This intense identification and connection with the Company values and Jonathan himself are suggestive of a system operating at lower levels of differentiation.

Also suggestive of lower levels of differentiation is the extreme reactivity of people within the system. They will generally respond to issues, problems, or each other more on the basis of emotion rather than thinking. Jonathan often talks of acting not

from the head, but from the heart. A somewhat unintended consequence of that philosophy is that staff too often react on the basis of how they feel at the moment rather than on what they think. As the case study indicates, emotional reactions are not always productive or supportive of effective organizational action.

While the level of differentiation within the organization's relationship system is low, the level of chronic anxiety is high. Almost any action or event can trigger a crisis within the system and cause anxiety to spread and infect people throughout the organization. For example, personnel changes, such as promotions or departures, are inevitable within any organization. However, at the Company for Youth, the system reacts anxiously to such changes. Anxiety is also heightened when conflicts which exist between individuals or divisions frequently expand to encompass other members of the Company.

The anxious response -- diminished self-esteem, fear that access to or approval from Jonathan will be effected, increased gossip and argument, overt and covert acting-out behaviors -- has a negative impact on the performance of individuals and of the organization as a whole. Staff members express frustration at the seemingly never-changing patterns of reaction and upheaval which they experience. Yet they feel that they have no power to alter the dynamic. They belong to a relationship system which has become so fused and reactive that there is little flexibility of response. Anything and everything can be a crisis, for individuals and for the organization as a whole. This is

the Company for Youth's organizational experience of decline.

Legislative and Public Information Office

Though most of the staff members working at LPIO are extremely unhappy with their experience at the office, they feel incapable of changing the situation for the better. The staffers believe that their range of action is severely circumscribed by Larry, whom they see as controlling everything that happens within the office. They see themselves as "rat[s] in a cage on a wheel, operating in a closed-in cell." They are locked-in, trapped, with no way out; their self-esteem has been damaged, their level of differentiation lowered by their experience.

Despite their expressions of discomfort or dislike of Larry, it is clear that many still are tightly fused emotionally to him. They instinctively run to him when they are confronted by their supervisors or become involved in conflicts with others in the office. Several speak about how hurt they feel when Larry ignores what they do. Conversely, they spread the word gleefully when he offers a pat-on-the-back for a job well done, showing off their sign of favor to others who may not have been similarly recognized. These strong desires for approbation and intense fears of disapproval are also signs of lower levels of differentiation

There is little sense of teamwork or support within the relationship system. In fact, it is most accurately characterized as a system of distance, isolation, competition,

and distrust. Staff members feel uncomfortable and unskilled in working cooperatively with their colleagues; they find it easier and safer to operate on their own, whether or not such a style is efficient or effective for the office as a whole.

Needless to say, given the nature of the relationship system, staff feel highly anxious almost all of the time. They are often fearful that they will make a mistake or do something Larry does not want. Rather than risk his anger, they frequently sacrifice their independent thinking and respond only to what they know or assume to be his directives. They feel insecure about their positions, worrying that their jobs will be changed or opportunities for advancement damaged by the frequent office reorganizations. They believe that they have no say, no control over what happens to them professionally. Because there are often several interpersonal dramas being enacted at any given time, they find it difficult to remain detached from the emotion and conflict which suffuses the system.

For most of those interviewed, the only hope for change, for improvement, will require Larry's removal from the office. Absent that action, they have no other ideas and are able to strategize only about ways that they might protect themselves within the current system. They feel miserable, they feel stuck, they feel that they are selling themselves and the organization short. They feel caught in a system that frequently is changed structurally, by reorganizations and turnover, but which never really changes in character. They describe an organization experiencing decline, but feel that they have

no resources, no power to alter that circumstance.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

# CONCLUSIONS

## Summary

The essential question of this research study is whether Bowen Theory can be used as a tool for understanding organizational decline. Does this theory, which was devised to explain why dysfunction and breakdown occur in one type of human relationship system, the family, help us to understand how dysfunction and decline develop in a different human relationship system, that which exists within the organization? Can organizational decline be productively understood as a function of an ineffective relationship process within the organization?

To respond in a summary, concluding way to the questions posed for this study, we should first review Bowen's framework for explaining human behavior. Bowen Theory provides a framework for understanding human behavior in general and emotional illness in particular. The theory asserts that human beings are not autonomous actors whose behavior is guided primarily by rational thought. Rather, they are beings whose behavior is influenced to a large extent by the pattern of interactions with those who surround them.

Bowen Theory operates in contradistinction to functionalist organization theory,

which assumes rationality, however bounded it might be, as the driving force for individual action. Bowen Theory's concept of the emotional system is supported by brain research studies, including those of Gazzaniga (1985) which have found that much of human behavior is automatic, operating outside of conscious thought processes. It also provides support to Weick's concept of retrospective sense making; though much of man's behavior is instinctual, he still feels compelled to give reasons to explain action. (1979). Summarizing this view of human action, Harmon and Mayer state that:

> [c]ontrary to the instrumentally rational view in which thought precedes, gives rise to, and orients action, it is action that precedes conscious thought. Thus, organizational action, like all other forms of human action, is most appropriately conceived of as a process of retrospective sense making, that is, of understanding what we have done after we have done it. (1986, pp. 339-340).

The case studies presented provide evidence for this proposition. In each of the organizations studied, interviewees describe systems in which behavior appears driven primarily by emotion. At the School of Continuing Learning, staff members who were disenchanted with their leaders reacted automatically to try to "save" those leaders when it appeared they were threatened by forces outside the School. At the Company for Youth, emotional reactions to relationships, events, or situations are the norm. Staff members within the Legislative and Public Information Office describe themselves as driven by a sense of fear and insecurity which colors their actions and reactions. In each organization, staff members report spending a significant amount of time, both in groups

and on their own, attempting to rationalize or make sense of their own behavior and that of others.

The human relationship system is the unit of analysis in Bowen Theory. Each individual in the system constitutes a locus of process that both shapes and reflects the behavior of those around him/her. Dysfunction results when there is an ineffective relationship process within the human system. Unlike those who assume a management-oriented approach and who focus primarily on only that segment of the organizational system having to do with rational management control, Bowen Theory states that all members of the system play significant parts in creating and sustaining an ineffective -- or effective -- relationship process.

Here, again, the case studies illustrate how all members of the organization play a part in maintaining the equilibrium of the system. While it is clear that the leaders of all three organizations have significant power and influence within their respective organizational systems, it is also clear that staff members enhance that range of power by their own abdication of or unwillingness to use their own personal power. In each case, staff members talk of unconsciously or consciously adopting interactional styles or behaviors which may not be natural or effective for them or the organization, but are instead reflections of the behavior around them. Interviewees also describe how they maneuver to resist changing the balance of the system, even as they clamor about the need for a more effective organization and relationship process. Most of those

interviewed truly believe that they have no power to influence how the system operates. They feel trapped by a process, even though from a Bowenian view they help create and sustain it.

Bowen Theory identifies the interconnected processes which can be found in all families or other relationship systems and which can, under certain circumstances, lead to dysfunction and breakdown. The theory further holds that the key variables leading to dysfunction are level of differentiation and degree of chronic anxiety. When levels of differentiation within a system are low, that system becomes susceptible to breakdown when anxiety becomes chronic.

The case studies illustrate that many of those interlocking processes can be seen working within the organizations' relationship systems. The data also strongly suggest that all three organizations operate or operated at lower levels of differentiation. They also show that decline, in either of the two categories defined in the literature, can occur when the anxiety within the system becomes or became chronic. Thus, Bowen Theory can be seen as a useful tool to explain the phenomenon of organizational decline.

## Implications

The use of Bowen Theory as a tool for understanding organizational decline raises several issues that may help to inform theory development, future research, and organizational interventions. The insights gained from this alternative approach are not

apparent when decline is examined from the population ecology or management-oriented perspectives. By using Bowen Theory, and the metaphor of the psychic prison, our understanding of organizational decline can be enriched.

Approaching the question of organizational decline using Bowen Theory presents a view of responsibility within organizational systems that contrasts with the view of responsibility available from the other two perspectives. In the population ecology view, the question of human responsibility is to a large extent ignored. What happens inside the "black box", i.e., the thoughts, motives, and actions of the individuals who comprise the collectivity known as an organization, is considered unimportant or, in Kaufman's view, insufficiently rational to be effective in determining which organizations live and which die. The environment determines all.

The issue of individual responsibility is further clouded by the predominance of the organism metaphor in the decline literature. As noted previously, seeing organizations as organisms presumes that survival and growth are as necessary and natural for the former as it is for the latter. Thus, it is possible to assume that anything which promotes organizational survival and growth is good. Actions taken to promote those goals, whatever the cost in terms of the needs of those who comprise or come into contact with the organization might be, can then be justified.

The management-oriented approach assigns all responsibility for organizational action to those who occupy managerial positions and to problem employees. This

approach assumes that managers have, or should have, the capacity to be aware of and control all that happens in the organization. They are responsible for meeting all organizational goals and managing their people to attain those goals. Problem employees are those individuals who, by definition, create difficulties for the manager or co-workers. Their behavior, whether driven by negative attitudes, lack of skills, or intrapsychic conflict, is seen as creating problems for the entire organization, problems which management is expected to resolving either by "fixing" or "firing" the difficult employee.

How deeply ingrained this view of management responsibility is becomes clear from the responses provided in the case studies. Both the managers and the members of the systems have enormous -- and one might also say unrealistic -- expectations of those who are designated to be in charge. One clear consequence of this view is also apparent from the case studies. Employees see themselves as having little responsibility or power over what happens within the organization. As Harvey puts it:

> The manager's job, then, seems to alter the subordinates in some way. A disproportionate number of management education programs are designed to deal with leadership rather than followership. If organization members can be seduced into believing that leaders are more responsible than followers as causal factors in organizational success, then followers don't have to behave responsibly toward their leaders, toward one another, or toward their tasks as they go about their work. Subordinates are treated as nonentities. Given that, is it any wonder that followers become apathetic and nonproductive in any organization that denies their unique contribution? (1988, pp. 68-69).

A book recently available in the popular literature, *Crazy Bosses: Spotting Them, Serving Them, Surviving Them* (1992), posits that the only power employees really have within organizations is to attempt to outmaneuver their bosses, driving them crazy before the manager does the same to them.

Bowen Theory, with its emphasis on systems functioning and differentiation, presents a significantly different conception of and possibility for responsibility. First, all individuals within a system play a part in creating and maintaining the system; all bear some responsibility for the functioning of the system. Individuals do not merely react to a manager's or co-worker's behavior. Their own actions and responses shape the behavior of the manager and co-workers as well.

Second, a well-differentiated individual is one who is able to be responsible for self, whose behavior is consistent with inner beliefs, motivated by personal goals, and guided by intellect as well as by emotion. This individual is able to bring a complete self to the organization, to work confidently and competently, to communicate honestly and fully for the sake of himself/herself, others, and the organization. Though the employee who operates at a lower level of differentiation may be the more pliable and thus easier to manage, a manager who assumes responsibility for the functioning of those below him or her, who assumes a controlling or caretaking role, would, in Bowen's view, be promoting irresponsibility. Such irresponsibility does damage to all concerned.

As is clear from the case studies, the manager who assumes responsibility for

others not only will likely fail to meet expectations, but will also help to create disappointed and disempowered employees as well. As is also shown in the case studies, disappointed and disempowered employees are not productive and positive workers. All parties -- the manager, the employees, and the organization -- will suffer as a result. Using the Bowen Theory concept of differentiation, the effective manager would be the person who finds ways to promote the individual employee's own sense of power and responsibility rather than creating emotional dependencies by overfunctioning. In Bowen Theory, employee responsibility is a prerequisite for organizational and personal development and success. The approach thus provides an undergirding for the management model of Total Quality Management, which emphasizes the importance of the system and personal responsibility and empowerment for organizational effectiveness.

Management-oriented conceptions of authority assume that managers are "given authority for the purpose of putting pressure on employees to perform better and produce more." (White, 1990, p. 226). When employees fail to perform as demanded, the manager is expected to name and blame those who fail to meet expectations. Likewise, in systems with this traditional view of management authority, employees are likely to blame managers for their own failures for having failed to provide them with whatever tools, instructions, or support they as employees believed they needed to get the job done. As the case studies make clear, blame, either directed to or issuing from the authority figure, is a fact of organizational life. Yet, such a conception of authority assumes a

degree of rationality and control which, as Bowen Theory demonstrates, does not exist in reality for either managers or members of the rest of the system.

Just as Bowen Theory offers a new conception of responsibility within the organization, so, too, does it offer a new conception of management authority. As has been shown, managers do not operate autonomously or apart from the organizational relationship system. Their personal and professional actions and attitudes influence and in turn are influenced by the personal and professional actions and attitudes of those who surround them. In systems which are so interconnected and interdependent, the concept of blame loses its meaning. All are responsible for success, all are responsible for failure.

The preceding discussion does not imply that all authority and responsibility within an organization needs to be levelled. What needs to be changed is the conception of how management authority is to be used. Managers can no more avoid or separate dealing with personal and performance problems of their employees than they can avoid or separate dealing with their own issues which influence their own and the system's operation. What they can do, as White puts it, is use their authority dialectically in a process which enables all parties to the problem to construct a factual picture of the situation. (1990, p. 231). Though the manager retains the final authority for deciding how to deal with a given situation, the dialectic process can help him/her become aware of how the problem situation was constructed, including his/her own role in that

construction. The dialectic process also helps the employee come into contact with him/herself and offers the possibility for him/her to learn and grow, without carrying the stigma of being blamed.

The use of Bowen Theory can also help to direct organizational theory and intervention strategies. Management-oriented approaches to organizational decline seem to assume that problems within an organization can be solved by improving the management practices. Thus, a significant portion of organizational training efforts are designed to improve management practices. The theory assumes that once a manager learns to manage his/her people more effectively or use management tools more appropriately, problems will be mitigated or resolved.

Unfortunately, this approach ignores the "systemness" of the organization. The attitude of essentially discounting large segments of the human organizational system and of ignoring the importance of the relationships and interdependencies has something of a paradoxical result. As White puts it, "All cause-effect relationships are mutual, hence any attempt at assertion of control produces a countervailing effect in the opposite direction. Therefore, only the overall, the system itself, can produce change in any given direction." (1990, p.202).

Bowen Theory demonstrates that dysfunction and decline are a function of the entire system and can be halted or reversed only when all members of the system are capable of behaving and are allowed to behave responsibly for themselves and toward

others. Only those theories or interventions which acknowledge that problems exist within the context of a system, understand the dynamics supporting the system's equilibrium, recognize the limitations of management power and control, appreciate the effect of the emotional system on human functioning, and support the development of personal responsibility of all members of the organizational relationship system are likely to be effective in addressing the process of decline.

Studying organizational decline presents some peculiar methodological difficulties. In American society, which puts a premium on success and denigrates any form of failure, getting individuals, particularly managers, to recognize and/or admit that an organization is in decline is difficult. Often, decline becomes apparent only retrospectively, when the organization has ceased to exist or is in such a state of crisis that difficulties finally cannot be denied. Is decline then inevitable, to be understood only after the fact?

It is here that applying Bowen Theory to organizations may have what might be considered to be predictive power. As with families, the processes which the theory describes can be expected to be found in all organizational systems, including those that are functioning "normally," i.e., without dysfunction, as well as those that may be experiencing significant problems. When organizational members are aware of how the relationship processes work within their particular human system, understand how each individual influences and is influenced by those processes, and are supported and

encouraged to assume responsibility for self, they may have what can be, in effect, an early warning system for when the relationship process is becoming ineffective.

The Bowen Theory approach to the therapeutic process makes it a particularly useful tool for training in organizational settings. In therapy, the emphasis is on process - paying attention to how the process works, to what happens when and where within the relationship system rather than emphasizing the content of problems. Such an emphasis may be more comfortable and effective for members of the system to deal with and integrate. Members of the relationship system may then become more aware of the specific points in the process where problems occur, more alert to their own reactions to different stimuli, and thus more capable of working to modify their behavior and reactions to avoid the system -- and themselves -- descending into dysfunction and decline.

The perspective offered by Bowen Theory may also be useful as a model for training in constructive confrontation. Attempts at constructive confrontation often go awry for two reasons. First, the confrontation is often centered on the content of a problem rather than on the process - the factual analysis of what happened, when, where, etc. Second, the emotional systems of those involved in the confrontation often become engaged. Once the emotional system is engaged, it overwhelms the intellectual process, making the chances for constructive, rational discourse about and resolution of the problem increasingly remote. Training which would help people learn how to become

more aware of what triggers their automatic emotional systems and how to engage more fully their intellectual systems and which would teach them how to identify the processes leading to the creation of the problem would increase the likelihood that constructive confrontations could occur.

Thus, Bowen Theory can offer not only a new conceptualization of how decline develops within organizations but may also, potentially, provide a way of identifying and perhaps limiting the decline itself. This dissertation has presented a way to understand decline that differs from approaches that appear in the current literature. Future research will be necessary to confirm that conceptualization and to explore the utility of the theory for predictive and intervention purposes.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

### Personal Reflections En Route

December, 1991 - Proposal Defense

I had a very personal reason for selecting the topic of organizational decline for my dissertation. Over the years, I had worked in several organizations which were dysfunctional, in terms of low employee morale, high rates of turnover, confusion over mission, perceptions of inequality and differential standards for different people, etc., and for a couple which actually no longer existed. I had also witnessed organizational events which did not seem to make sense in light of people's rational assessments or explanations for their own behavior. I and my colleagues had spent many hours trying to figure out what was going on in those places. It also seemed that whenever I talked to people who worked in different places that they, too, felt that their organizations were dysfunctional and even, sometimes, damaging places to work.

When talking about the problem of dysfunction or decline or reviewing what was currently in the literature, I found that the explanations for dysfunction generally fell into three major categories:

1. poor management, generally focused on the leader of the organization;
2. dysfunctional individuals who created problems by bringing their own personal craziness into the organization; or

3. changes in the environment which affected what happened inside the organization.

All of those explanations seemed deficient to me. If you accepted any or all of them, you were then forced to accept or deal with the following conclusions: that staff members were helpless or powerless to change what happened; that staff, as individuals or a group, had no responsibility for what happened within the organization, for the problem was always defined as outside of themselves; that even when crazy people left the system, the dysfunction remained; or that low morale, productivity, or job satisfaction were to be taken as unavoidable facts of organizational life. I found that I could not happily accept any or all of those conclusions.

I wanted to find a better way for me to understand why and how organizations come to be dysfunctional or disappear, why negative dynamics never seemed to change. I became interested in the idea of viewing organizations as products of the unconscious during the capstone course on Organization Development in 1989. In that course, I used the model of an alcoholic family system as a tool for analyzing organizational action. That model seemed to make sense to me. I began to look at the literature on family systems to see if the theory on how that type of relationship system functioned was applicable in an organizational setting. Thus, the idea of the dissertation was born.

January 4, 1992 - Research Beginnings

Though I have heard people talk about how a dissertation comes to overwhelm and

overtake one's life, I never appreciated fully what that comment meant. I think I am beginning to now. Since I defended my proposal a few weeks ago, thoughts about the dissertation seem to consume most of my waking and sleeping hours. No, there's no escape even in dreams.

Here's an example. I have spent many waking hours trying to figure out how best to handle the interviews at LPIO. With an Inspector General investigation into the office management just beginning, tensions are higher than ever among office staff. No one knows what will happen. I have been asked by some of those who have agreed to interviews whether I was going to interview Larry. I had planned to do that, or at least request an interview, but they are scared to death that he will ask or find out who else I've spoken with, if he knows directly that I am doing this study. The bottom line is that they won't feel comfortable talking to me if I talk to him. I might lose the majority of my informants.

Last night I dreamed about the problem. When I went in to interview Larry, his office was set up like an old-fashioned interrogation room, one with the chair in the middle of an otherwise bare room and a single light swinging down over the chair. As soon as I sat down, Larry began peppering me with questions: "What do you want? Who are you talking to? What are they saying?" As I was leaving the office, there was a line-up of staff people outside waiting for their turn in the chamber. They all looked terrified.

I know how they feel because I remember feeling that way myself when I worked there. It's even worse now, as the IG looks into how Larry has been running the office; no one knows that will turn out. Do I potentially make things worse by interviewing Larry? If I don't, do I compromise my data? I'm committed to being as fair and "objective" as I can be in this effort; can I possibly be fair and objective I don't give Larry, a major player in the system, a chance to have his say? Am I avoiding dealing with my own feelings about Larry - I really hated my job there and left feeling angry. The people who I am interviewing are more than mere former colleagues. They are people whom I like and trust and who like and trust me. Do I possibly contribute to making their lives more difficult? I remember seeing it stated that this issue of obtaining access and information from participants in declining organizations is a methodological problem within the area of decline research. Now I actually have an emotional feel, rather than just an intellectual understanding, for the problem. I don't know what the right answer is.

January 19, 1992

The dissertation support group met today. It's really helpful to have people around who understand what you're going through. It sometimes feels like a group therapy session - you get insights into your project and your personal process through the group. God knows, I often feel I need those insights.

I'm still grappling with the questions about interviews at LPIO - no decision yet.

I see it as an issue of trust. I need my informants to trust me, to feel comfortable talking in order to get the data I need. How do I protect that trust?

I'm also grappling with preparing my interview questions. I'm trying to figure out how to get information about events and relationships without being too leading in my questions. If I ask people about specific events or relationships, I may get continuity of response, but I also may be getting them to focus on what is meaningful for me, not what is meaningful for them. I know that phrases like "relationship system" mean something to me, but probably won't to interviewees. How do I ask questions that don't require terminology explanations, explanations which might end up stacking the deck for specific responses? This formulation of questions is not as easy as I thought it would be.

I've also been thinking a lot about my relation to each of the three organizations. I left each place because, at least to some degree, I was unhappy or dissatisfied or had outgrown my experience there. I think that time and distance have given me some perspective on what happened in each, but the fact that I chose to write my dissertation on these organizations shows that I have not disconnected completely from my time there. I know that this is not a purely intellectual exercise. There's an emotional component, too; I want - I need - to understand why and how those placed worked and how I fit in there. But I also have no desire to reignite the intensity of the feelings I had when working in those places. So, I am still dealing with a relationship problem; how to connect without getting fused within the system.

February 15, 1992

Another issue to deal with. Should I ask the same questions in each organization or should I tailor three different sets of questions. If I ask different questions of each, how will I be able to compare and analyze data across cases? If I ask the same questions, will I miss nuances of the character in each? I am also trying to figure out how you get at the underlying process - the unconscious level - and still get information that tells you what happened, when, how, etc.

I'm not finding lots of help in the methodological literature. Yes, there is general information which I used in my proposal to support the principle that you cannot separate the researcher's subjective experience from the research. And there is discussion of the techniques of focused on in-depth interviews. But I am not finding a lot which is helping me to frame the questions. I just finished an article by Das, which says: "The results of interviews are as good as the questions asked; yet good questions that are open-ended, neutral, and clear may not be easy to identify." (Das, 1983, p. 309). No kidding!

I think I have resolved the issue about interviewing Larry. I am not going to do it. Though I am concerned about losing his input - assuming he would agree to participate - my greater concern is the level of discomfort among the other interviewees such contact might cause. I found an article by Sutton ("Reactions of Nonparticipants as Additional Rather than Missing Data: Opportunities for Organizational Research") which

argues that you can gain valuable information even from those who are not asked to participate, but who are encountered in the research process. Clearly, the fearful reaction of those who have agreed to participate tells me something about the nature of the system and the character of the relationships employees have with their top manager.

March 4, 1992 - Meeting with Orion

I understand now why a dissertation can take so long. You spend all this time working on a particular piece (e.g., interview questions), only to discover that what you have done doesn't quite fit what you need to do. After all that agonizing and time spent putting together a set of interview questions, I realize that I needed to take something of a different approach. As Orion put it, I need to try to get people to answer less from their heads and more from their emotions. (After all, I am arguing that people act more often on the basis of emotion rather than thinking.) Therefore, the questions need to be reworked. At least now I think I have a better sense of what I am looking for.

April 1 - Interviews Begin

I didn't realize it at the time, but somehow it seems appropriate to me to be starting my pilot interviews on April Fool's Day. I'm just not sure how it is appropriate.

I have arranged to do two pilot interviews for each organization. I will also be talking with one person whom I know well and one to whom I was not very close. This way, I will be able to see if the questions work across organizations and across people.

The two I did today, from the Company for Youth, were really quite interesting.

The two women whom I spoke with were both very thoughtful, introspective, and cooperative. Clearly, though each is now gone from the organization, they retain strong feelings about their experience there and are, as I am, still trying to figure out how the dynamic of the place operated. I was pleased to see that though they responded differently to the questions, giving different examples or incidents or expressing different feelings, there appears to be a similarity in theme in their responses. We'll see how this carries through on the other pilots and interviews. At least the questions worked with these two.

April 7, 1992

Well, the pilots are complete and I'm pretty pleased with the data I've gotten so far. I find it interesting that, even after all of the discussions I have had with various people (and even interviewees) about these organizations, I still am learning something new from what they say in response to the questions.

I'm also a little surprised by the depth of emotion which is coming through during the interviews. The thoughts and feelings they are expressing are not new; I have heard and seen them while I worked at the organizations and in subsequent conversations. But it appears that the interview process, which asks them to concentrate very specifically about their experience in the organization, unleashes a great deal of energy and feeling. In that way, it resembles a therapy session a bit. There certainly is some venting going on.

It is hard during the interviews to keep my own thoughts and feelings out of the process. Those interviewed so far often want to get into real conversations about their experiences, they want to know what I think, how I assess the organization. They are, in essence, trying to triangle me in. I've had to hold back and try to keep the focus on them alone. I don't want to guide or color their responses. I have to keep saying, "I want to hear what you think and feel," and cut off questions or conversation which pulls me into the discussion. This is not always easy.

Thus far, the comments of those from the Company for Youth appear to be the most insightful about both process and substance; it's clear that they have spent time thinking about life in the organization. Those at the School of Continuing Learning have tended not to express much emotion or to express feeling and then deny it. I've been somewhat startled by the depth of fear, anger, and frustration expressed by the people at LPIO; at the same time, they express a sadness, a sense of resignation that nothing will ever change.

April 21, 1992

I got a call today from one of the people I interviewed from SCL. She wanted to follow-up on the interview and was curious about my reaction to what she and others had said. The call raised a question for me about the value of the kind of personal contact I have with several of the people I am interviewing. I can see the issue as being both positive or negative.

In the positive sense, continuing contact gives me additional information, as interviewees have second or third thoughts. Rather than being limited to the snapshot view available from only one interview, I have what is more like an on-going motion picture. I get more data.

But can that on-going contact skew the picture? Obviously, I can't betray the confidences of others and relate what has been said in casual conversations outside the interview. If I give my reactions or interpretations of the data given to me, doesn't that then alter the nature of any responses I get after that point? I'm finding that I have to be very careful and limited in conversations outside of the interview. I also need to bind the data, otherwise I will never be able to find a stopping point.

What I do find interesting in this on-going contact from those I have interviewed is the intense interest they have in what I am finding. Those who are still in the organizations are almost desperate to understand what is going on in those systems. They are looking to me to provide an explanation which will enable them to understand and then, perhaps, control what is going on. Is this a case of overfunctioning? Are they so used to being in systems where someone else essentially defines the situation for them that they carry that expectation into other relationships?

April 24, 1992

I haven't really felt the difficult, conflicted side of interviewing people you know until yesterday and today.

On the easier side is the technical difficulty of interviewing people with whom you have worked who assume you know everything that they know. They talk in shorthand or in code. There seems to be an assumption that, even though I wasn't in the organization as long as they have been - and they know that - that I share their experience and knowledge. I have to stop frequently and ask them to explain; some seem quite surprised that I'm not completely on their wavelength. I've also discovered that a code - a secret smile, a vague comment followed by the statement "you know what I mean" - is a good way for people to avoid going directly on the record, but to still get some of their message across. I don't feel they are being consciously manipulative or secretive, but just can't quite bring themselves to acknowledge certain points.

The more difficult issue is my fear that I may end up in some sense betraying their trust with what I write. Practically everyone has said that they can to do all they can to help me complete my dissertation. Kathy even gave me permission to say that she said anything I need; I can make up my own data! (Though I often doubt her motives and sincerity, at the moment I think she was being genuine.) Almost all the interviewees have asked to see the finished product. They like and trust me - and have been candid and helpful. But how would Kathy take reading about herself as part of a dysfunctional system, about seeing how all her staff distrusted and disliked her? How will those who see their bosses as the sole cause of their troubles take my interpretation that they may be just as much a source? Okay, here am I attempting to take on responsibility for them,

assuming they can't handle a view of the world which might be different from theirs or place them in perhaps a less than flattering light. Now, who's overfunctioning?

May 6, 1992

Dinner last night with Lisa Weinberg was useful on a number of counts.

It was good to discuss the problems of the interview process with someone who is doing it, too. When are we probing enough, when too little? What responsibility do we have for the process experienced by the interviewees? (This is a particular problem for me, since I have relationships with the interviewees that transcend the dissertation process.) How do you deal with the fear that you have gathered absolutely nothing in your interview sessions? Is that balanced by the few - oh so few - moments when you actually believe you have stumbled onto something?

Our conversation also made clear to me that we are out of the mainstream of conventional organization theory. What is the responsibility of management for organizational action? How do employees enact organizations by what they do? Are personal development and growth prerequisites for professional growth? If yes, why are these mostly ignored by organizations? What accounts for the level of emotional intensity that exists among people in organizations? All of these are questions that we think are inadequately answered by the current literature. The question is: who are we to try to answer them? Ah, the angst of the doctoral student.

I was also comforted that Lisa has yet to write anything on her dissertation and

is also unsure of how best to go about it. This is the first time we have been confronted by a process for which there are truly no guides or formats that you can easily follow. The process is wholly your own. That's a frightening and overwhelming concept.

June 28, 1992

I'm nearing the end of the interviews, so it's probably a good time to look at the "sample" and see if I have met the standards set out in my proposal.

I've managed to interview all but two of the people who were part of the management team (or "family" as William puts it) at SCL. One of the people who was there when I was has since been fired and no one knows where she is. The other claims he wasn't there for long enough to have an opinion or feelings on the process; he declined to be interviewed. My interview with Kathy was not as complete as I would have liked it to have been. She canceled our original appointment, claiming hoarseness and illness, but then talked with me on the phone for over two hours (with nary a sniffle heard). She promised that we could continue at another time, but never would reschedule.

Obviously, at LPIO I was unable to interview Larry or two of his closest associates. In my proposal, I said that I would interview people whose experiences had been both good and bad; it was hard to find folks at LPIO who felt mostly positive. I compensated (I hope) by including people who had been there for both a long and short time and by contacting individuals from each of the different sections throughout the

office.

By the way, I was interviewed by the agency Inspector General office. Evidently, they are contacting many of the people who used to work there. I sympathized in some ways with the woman who interviewed me. She was finding it difficult to keep her feelings and opinions about the case to herself as she conducted the interviews. Clearly, from what she had heard, she believed that Larry's management was, at best, inappropriate, and she said as much. I know it's hard to maintain your objectivity and distance when you are in interview situations. I hope I did better than she did.

I got to talk to everyone I wanted to at the Company for Youth. Though Jonathan was not in a particularly talkative mood during the interview, he did ease up over the lunch which followed. I also have notes/reflections in my journals from previous conversations he and I have had about the office dynamics over the years. I guess I enjoyed the interviews with this group of people the most...their metaphors were the most colorful, their passions the most strong, their insights the most profound.

I wonder how all of this will translate into written case studies.

July 18, 1992

I had an interesting dream just as I am set to start analyzing the data. I was talking to a man (Michael?) and a woman (Cynthia?) about my interview methodology. They were criticizing the study because I didn't ask enough questions. They said that I needed at least 100 different categories of questions to get accurate and valid data; I asked

only five major questions. I looked at them with utter panic and asked "What do I do now?" Then I woke up. How reassuring!

August 15, 1992

Aside from the incredibly tedious aspects of data analysis, handling the data, etc., I am enjoying the process as a whole. Now that I have sorted the data across questions and processes, I am constantly being surprised at finding the themes running through the responses. It's interesting particularly because the questions were so general. Even though people might have given different examples of incidents in response to a question, you can still see the similarities in what process or effect or event they are discussing. In fact, it's more interesting that people have come up with different examples...it shows both how individuals experience their worlds in unique ways and how thoroughly the processes have permeated throughout all organizational action.

Up to this point, I have avoided looking back at my journals covering my time within the organizations. A quick glance at them has not necessarily told me anything I wasn't getting from the interviews, but has recalled the intensity of feeling I experienced while working in those places. I have picked that up from the interviews, particularly with people who are still working within the organizations - the depth of feeling is relatively easy to detect when talking with people. I just had forgotten how deeply felt were some of my own passions, angers, frustrations, etc. at the time. The journals have made me realize again how this dissertation touches more than the

intellectual, for myself as well as my subjects. Now, the trick will be writing it without letting the emotional overwhelm the intellectual (just as Bowen says).

November 11, 1992

I met with Orion today to go over the data and my preliminary findings. It has been difficult to get myself to the point where I was able to complete the analysis...my father's death and the cumulative effect of all my medical problems and hospitalizations this year have finally taken their toll. I just haven't been able to focus and concentrate as well since Dad died. In addition, I feel as if I have lost a piece of myself, a feeling of security that existed when he was here. From all of my reading in family theory, I understand that the process I am experiencing is perfectly natural, to be expected even. Again, though, it's one thing to intellectually understand a concept, another entirely to feel it.

Anyway, Orion seems to think that the data provides evidence for what I hoped I would find, that is, that the processes which obtain in families can be found in organizations and that those processes can contribute to the development of decline. Now, he says, go write it.

February 22, 1993

I have just received comments on the case studies from those whom I interviewed. As recommended in Yin's book, I wanted some kind of check on the validity of my description of each case. My "reviewers" seemed to think that the cases as written

provide a realistic picture of organizational life in each case. They expressed surprise by some of the comments their co-workers made, and, of course, wanted to know who said what. I'm just relieved that the cases seem to tell the story. That was the point of the exercise. Now, onward to the analysis.

April 8, 1993

Good news! Orion seems to think that the cases and the analysis chapters are, with some minor modifications, pretty much on target. That's an incredible relief. I have little sense of judgment or objectivity when it comes to my own writing. It's hard for me to determine if what I have written actually says anything at all, and, in this case, if it says anything that is acceptable at the level of a dissertation. With Orion's encouragement, I now feel that I can get on with it and just finish the job. Gee, is this a case of fusion with him, that my own sense of worth vis-a-vis this product is solely dependent upon someone else's assessment? Or, is this a case where some paranoia is not out of line? After all, I don't get to say whether the dissertation is acceptable or not.

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