The Design Principles and Laissez-faire: Logic and Pure and Applied Forms

Merrelyn Emery and Don deGuerre

The design principle and laissez-faire have been introduced in previous chapters but here we examine them from the logical perspective so that we may get to grips more easily with them, particularly laissez-faire in both its pure and applied forms. We show that the pure laissez-faire is a theoretical concept only but that approximations to it are widespread in practice.

Pure Concepts

The first design principle (DP1) is called redundancy of parts as there is an excess of parts that may be employed at any given time. In DP1, responsibility for coordination and control is located at least one level above where the work, learning or planning is being performed. In DP2, the specifications are exactly the opposite: the excess is in the functions of the parts rather than of the parts themselves and responsibility for coordination and control is located with those doing the task. As is seen below, laissez-faire (LF) defined as no design principle is the limiting case of the set.

The full set of possibilities for location of responsibility for the basic organizational dimensions is exhausted by the set consisting of:

- DP1 = where responsibility for coordination and control is located at least one level above where the work is done, (i.e. *not with* the workers)
- DP2 = where responsibility for coordination and control is located at the level where the work is done, (i.e. *with* the workers)
- Laissez-faire (LF) = where responsibility for coordination and control is located nowhere, (i.e. *neither with nor not with* the workers).

These two sets of definitional elements yield three (a full set of) structural possibilities*:*

- DP1 = a structure of dominance (*inequality of power relations*)
- DP2 = a structure of non dominance (*equality of power relations*)
- LF = no structure (*neither equality nor inequality of power relations*)

In *systems terms* this becomes:

- DP1 = *non jointly optimized* socio-technical (psychological) (ecological) organization
- DP2 = *jointly optimized* socio-technical (psychological) (ecological) organization
- LF = *no organization,* of any socio-technical (psychological) (ecological) variety

Therefore we see that:

- DP1 = redundancy of parts
- DP2 = redundancy of functions
- LF = no redundancy

constitutes a full set. This means that every time at least two people, organizations, groups, communities or systems begin to transact, their three choices of structural arrangements between them are given above.

Explicating these logical sets shows that LF cannot produce an organization because by definition there are no structural relationships between the parts, the people. It exists only as a pure concept.

Confusions of climate, leadership and structure

As mentioned in the 1989 Introduction, the first landmark in the discovery of the design principles consisted of a series of experiments carried out in the USA (1938 to 1940) to learn more about the phenomena of autocracy and democracy. The participants were boys organized into clubs, each with 'leaders' adopting different leadership styles. Originally a study of autocracy and democracy, it rapidly became a study of three forms of "social climate" (Lippitt, 1940), or what we today call "structure." The third form, laissez-faire, was discovered by accident, as it arose from a misunderstanding of the nature of democracy. Ralph White was inexperienced and his understanding of democracy was individual freedom. He let the boys "do their own thing," As his approach produced totally different results from the other democratic groups, democracy and laissez-faire were distinguished. Many people practice laissez-faire thinking that they are being democratic just because they are not controlling autocratically (White, 1990). Unfortunately, this confusion of democracy and laissez-faire is alive and well.

Once the confusion between democracy and laissez-fare was exposed, there was a second series of studies of the *three* climates using four 10, and 11-year-old boys' clubs. Each club experienced different rotating patterns of autocracy, democracy, and laissez-faire and different adult leaders, all of whom had been trained in the three roles. The study revealed stark differences between the three. Although the autocratic leaders behaved throughout as dictators, the democratic leaders functioned mainly as a friendly resource and help to the groups, whereas the laissez-faire leaders gave individual freedom. In autocracy, the centerpiece and focus of the work was the leader; in democracy, it was the group; and in laissez-faire, there was none.

The autocratic leader made all the rules, dictated the activities, and praised and criticized personally. The democratic leader discussed rules and encouraged group decision making about goals, with technical help from the leader if required. The democratic leader was fact oriented in praise and blame and was a group member in spirit. There were no rules made in laissez-faire; the leader supplied materials and gave information only if asked, did not participate in the group work, did not praise or blame, and did not attempt to regulate work (Lippit & White, 1943).

At this point let us be clear – in these experiments, there was no formal legal structure. There were some boys and an adult, and each adult had three ways of behaving that were so different in practice that each module of boys plus adult constituted a different structure. In autocracy, the adult held coordination and control (DP1). In democracy, the adult shared coordination and control with the boys, i.e. he was a member of the group (DP2). In laissez-faire there was no coordination or control. The adult was as distant from the boys as they were from each other

(Laissez-faire or LF). In other words, there were two structures and an absence of structure. From now on I refer to 'adult' rather than 'leader' and use the short hand for the structures.

The three structures produced very different behaviors in the boys. The boys in DP1 showed two major clusters of behavior: submissive and aggressive. In the submissive condition, individual boys became dependent on the adult with virtually no capacity to initiate group action. In the aggressive condition, the boys felt frustration directed at the adult (Lippitt & White, 1947) and rebellion (Lippitt & White, 1943). In other words, the authoritarian adult produced either dependency or a reaction called "fight/flight."

When the adult left the room in the LF condition, one of the boys exerted leadership and "achieved a more coordinated group activity than when the relatively passive adult was present" (Lippitt & White, 1947, p. 323). This phenomenon is called *pairing* (Bion, 1952, 1961; M. Emery, 1999). These three symptoms of group dysfunction—dependency, fight/flight, and pairing—are discussed in more detail in *Searching*, 1999.

Aggression in DP1 and LF was directed toward other groups and individuals as well as toward the adult. The boys experienced interpersonal tension and scapegoating. At a point in one of the sessions, a stranger entered and made remarks critical of the boys' work. The boys expressed both submission and aggression toward the stranger. The boys in DP2 rejected the stranger's criticism and resisted taking their frustrations out on other groups (Lippitt & White, 1947).

The boys made more demands for attention in DP1 than in the other two conditions. They were dependent on the adult for task-oriented matters and social status. This meant that competition developed between the boys themselves. In LF and DP2, the boys sought more attention and approval from each other. However, only DP2 showed evidence of stable cooperative structure.

Morale—in the sense of cohesion, using *we* not *I*, working together for group goals, and being friendly rather than hostile—was highest in the democratic groups DP2and lowest in DP1. The submissive boys suffered the lowest morale. In both DP1 and LF, the boys experienced a great deal of frustration, of both the need for autonomy and the need for sociability. The researchers were surprised by the extent to which DP1 inhibited the normal, free and easy sociability of the boys. This was particularly so in the submissive condition (Lippitt & White, 1943).

Frustrations in LF were also high for the need for worthwhile cooperative achievement and that for clear structure and frustration from the "vicious cycle of frustration-aggression-frustration" (Lippitt & White, 1943, p. 503). The boys wanted to accomplish things, but lacking a structure for cooperation, they were all talk and no action. They became dissatisfied with the chaos, confusion, and uncertainty. Even the boys who tried hardest to use their freedom to get work done found it impossible, as they experienced constant interference from other boys.

The amount of productive work varied significantly between the three conditions. When the adults were late in DP1, the boys had made no initiative to start new work or to continue with work already under way. In DP2, the groups were already productive. The boys in LF were active but not productive (Lippitt & White, 1947). When the adult left the submissive boys alone, the percentage of time spent in serious work dropped from 74% to 29%. In the aggressive boys, the drop was from 52% to 16%. The motivation to work was adult induced, not intrinsic to the boys. In

contrast, the DP2 group remained stable, with a negligible drop from 50% to 46%. A similar negligible drop was seen in LF (Lippitt & White, 1943), but as little work was done anyway, this remained unsatisfactory.

DP2 produced by far the highest quality of work and the boys made far more suggestions about how work could be done. They had internalized the group goals. Pride in work also differed significantly. The boys in DP2 presented their work or took it home, whereas in one instance of DP1, the boys actually tried to destroy what they had made.

The boys in DP2 were eight times as independent as those in DP1 and twice as much as those in LF (Lippitt & White, 1947). DP2, not LF, resulted in the greatest individual differences. Although fewer expressions of individuality in DP1should surprise no one, many will be surprised by the fact that there was less individuality in LF (Lippitt & White, 1947). Contrary to what many believe, freedom to do whatever one pleases actually results in a reduced opportunity to express individuality. Autonomy without a balancing degree of belongingness with peers restricts and inhibits personal growth (M. Emery, 1999).

As each club experienced a different sequence of structures, it was possible to see effects arising from the sequences. Groups that passively accepted DP1 at the beginning of the sequence were much more frustrated and resistant to it again if they had experienced DP2 in the meantime. If a group had not experienced DP2, there was little effect.

Overall, the three structures had dramatically different effects, and structure proved to be the most powerful of any variable measured. DP2 showed its superiority on every measure. This result has now been found many times over in just about every form of human endeavor. Because laissez-faire is qualitatively different from both autocracy and democracy and its effects are so negative, it cannot be a half-way house between bureaucracy and democracy (see pp). Unfortunately today, many laissez-faire organizations exist where the structure is DP1 on paper but generally ignored (de Guerre, 2000). They tend to fail (Trist & Dwyer, 1993).We explore these approximations to laissez-faire below.

We can now see why some have interpreted these experiments as leadership studies. Without knowledge of the design principles and their genotypical status, these interpreters have merely read the words, understood the phenotypes and, therefore, claimed that the most important factor is leadership. Following this logic leads these people to continue to train ‘leaders’ to behave as the adults did in the democratic (DP2) structure even though their organizations are legally DP1.

We can also see why pure laissez-faire can exist only at the conceptual level. LF in its pure form is an alien concept to a social or group species. It is almost impossible for humans who are physically together to act as if there are no structural relationships between them. People normally attempt to set up relationships upon the first meeting and most people attempt to structure these as relationships between peers (DP2). The boys in the LF conditions were like fish out of water with none of their expectations met for either DP2 or DP1. Only rarely did any of them achieve ‘a more coordinated group activity’; mostly they simply lashed out as individuals or became submissive. That is, while there was no leader holding responsibility for coordination and control and there were no shared goals for which the boys could have collectively held that

responsibility, it was still not pure laissez-faire because the boys could not accept such a thing.

We suspect the following experiment has never been done but it needs to be. It is a test of how difficult it is for people to maintain LF, no relationship. Imagine a room of adults whose instructions were that "In this experiment we are measuring people's feelings when they feel alone amidst others. Each of you is to behave as if you are alone and must remain alone, not in any sort of relationship with any of the others. We will measure your feelings half way through and at the end of the hour". We hypothesize that cameras and hidden observers would pick up non verbal signals designed to establish relationships. That is, we would expect that within a very short period of time, people would begin to establish either DP1 or DP2 relationships, most probably the latter, with others.

So while there is very little evidence that pure LF could exist more than momentarily, there is a wealth of evidence that many organizations are functioning as approximations to LF.

Laissez-faire: the applications

When we examine the design principles and LF analytically we can separate out dimensions other than simply coordination and control. Locating responsibility for coordination and control above the level at which an activity happens plus redundancy of parts leads to a supervisory system where the supervisor is a part redundant to the productive work of the organization. Similarly, all organizations are constituted for a purpose and this purpose is encompassed by a set of tasks and/or goals. In DP1, the level above is responsible for achieving this set of goals while in DP2, this responsibility is held by the self managing groups. In LF, there is no supervision and there are no goals so nobody is held responsible for meeting goals.

This gives us four quite separate dimensions of the design principles and LF, namely, responsibility for *control, coordination, supervision and meeting goals*. While the conceptual definitions of the design principles and LF are crystal clear, it is just as clear that individuals and groups can coordinate and control to different degrees, supervision may be close or more relaxed and different people, groups or levels of the hierarchy can be held responsible to varying degrees for group attainment or things going wrong more generally.

Therefore theoretically, it is possible for organizations to attempt to implement any combination of low/high supervision, allocation of low/high responsibility for coordination and/or control to varying groups or levels and various locations for meeting goals or not. But as we have seen above, some combinations of the high and low ends of these dimensions will be impossible to make work in practice. For example, it makes no sense to try to have a high level of supervision with a high level of group control because they are in conflict. Responsibility for control of who does what and how cannot be located at two separate levels of the hierarchy at the same time.

It is important to note here that when people understand the design principles and design their organization as a DP2 structure, their initial design will reflect the experience of their people in various technical tasks. Over time as the organization evolves, self managing groups will assume more functions as skills are more widely shared. But when people do not understand the design principles, they can design in these unworkable options and this is what we have witnessed in the last twenty plus years - a rush into a huge variety of organizational forms that cannot work well in practice. In other words, there are unworkable versions of DP1. Don deGuerre has called them '*loose DP1'*. They are the product of a continued belief in the assumptions of the Human Relations School.

Loose DP1, therefore, bears a resemblance to the original 1939 condition as the normal assumption would be that the adult would hold responsibility for coordination and control, but he didn't accept that responsibility and that is the situation in many DP1 organizations to day where

As the elements of LF spelt out above make clear, it is nigh on impossible to have a sustained LF organization. LF must necessarily be unstable and temporary. As the small illustration from Lewin, Lippitt & White above showed, people will always move to restore something more pleasant and viable. For how long can LF be sustained? For how long will top management tolerate the results?