The Dynamics of Organizational Change

One of the main objectives of the Institute was to advance understanding of the dynamics of organizational change. Carrying this out effectively necessitated building into organizations a new response-capability required more than ever by the changing society.

Bearing in mind the Lewinian principle that the best way to understand a system is to change it, opportunities were sought to work collaboratively with organizations in identifying changes that they needed to undertake. A new professional role had to be created, analogous to but different from the psycho-analytic role, that would enable the social scientist to facilitate the change process. This new role had to be acceptable to all stakeholders and permit intervention in situations of high conflict.

Working-Through Industrial Conflict. The project that became the proving ground for such endeavors was carried out during 1948–1951 in the London factories of a light engineering company (Glacier Metal). The project was led by Elliott Jaques. It is briefly described in the Series Introduction. The first contribution under this Theme is his analysis of the changes that took place in the Service Department of the Company, excerpted from his book, *The Changing Culture of a Factory* (1951). The Department was in severe conflict over an unresolved wages issue of long standing. This was worked through with Jaques' assistance and a Department Council (joint between management and labor) was formed after enormous distrust had been overcome.

The principles of taking the "independent role," conducting a "social analysis," and reporting only that which had been worked through and agreed for publication by all the stakeholders laid the foundations of an action-research model that had persisted until the present time. The extreme formality of Jaques' original role has been reduced and many variations have developed.

The Use of Unrecognized Cultural Mechanisms in an Expanding Machine Shop. The second contribution is A.K. Rice's account of changes taking place in the Line Shop of another department of the company. Conflicts between management and labor were contained in a negotiating committee sealed off from the rest of the department which needed to carry out, without a labor dispute, an expansion necessary for its economic survival. The latent function of the prolongation of the negotiations was to enable this to happen. When the expansion was completed the negotiations were rapidly concluded. The latent

function was recognized by most members of the Shop when Rice interpreted it.

On the Dynamics of Social Structure. A new theory arising from the Glacier Project is presented in Jaques' paper under this title, which puts forward the view that the social structures and cultures of organizations can be used unconsciously as defenses against anxiety, especially of a persecutory and depressive nature. This means that the deep conflicts of the individual members are projected into these structures and cultures. Any change in the organization tends to disturb these projections which are important for the identity of the individual. This is one reason why change is resisted even when its apparent benefits are great.

Social Systems as a Defense Against Anxiety. The notion of the social structuring of psychological defenses did not gain immediate acceptance. Even now it is ignored by the majority of researchers in organizational behavior. The first detailed empirical study which gained credence for it is Isabel Menzies Lyth's first contribution to this Theme. A study of the training of nurses in a teaching hospital, it has become a classic that has opened up for many scholars the study of social systems as a defense against anxiety.

A Psychoanalytical Perspective on Social Institutions. Menzies' second paper further develops the theory that interventions have to pay attention to changes in structure and role as well as in psycho-social climate. She extends the psychoanalytical basis by making use of Bowlby's work on mother/child separation and then shows how that was accomplished by re-modelling a cot unit in a children's orthopedic hospital.

The Assumption of Ordinariness as a Denial Mechanism: Innovation and Conflict in a Coal Mine. The theme of social defenses is carried forward by Trist and his colleagues (1963) in an analysis of the social use of the mechanism of denial. A major organizational innovation had taken place in one seam of a colliery in north-east Britain. Management and labor agreed to apply it in a new seam that was just opening up and which was of critical importance for the economic future of the mine. The details of the innovation had never been made explicit by those originally involved (who were not too clear themselves) to those about to be involved, who assumed it was merely a new-fangled way of doing what they were already familiar with.

This attitude epitomizes a major problem in bringing about change. The threat of the genuinely novel is too often so great that the novelty is denied. Proper briefings about the new are not held, required training is not given, not enough time is allowed for unlearning the old and mourning its loss, or working through the anxieties surrounding the consequences of the new. The penalties for not doing so are severe.

Temporary Withdrawal from Work: The Formation of an Absence Culture.
During a time of full employment such as the 1950s there was substantial
concern in industry over the cost of the prevailing high levels of labor turnover,
absenteeism, accidents and sickness. Since little understanding of them had
been obtained by conventional methods, such as exit interviewing and social
surveys, the Tavistock Institute was asked by the British Iron and Steel Re-
search Association to suggest a new approach. The method chosen was longi-
tudinal—to follow through, from records, a cohort of workers in particular
firms over a number of years. Three phases of organizational relationship were
found—induction crisis, differential transit and settled connection. As the
stayer role became more accepted disturbances in the individual's relationship
with the organization became internalized, illness being more frequent than
absenteeism or accidents.

The psycho-dynamics of this progression were explored in a series of
studies, the last of which, by Hill and Trist, is reported under this Theme. The
conclusion reached was that temporary withdrawal from work can act as a
psychological defense against the difficulties of maintaining a long-term rela-
tionship with an organization. This led to the idea of an "absence culture" and
what might be done to create an appropriate absence culture for a given
organization.

Freedom and Justice Within Walls. An opportunity to enter an entirely
different social system—the prison service—arose when the Prison Commis-
sioners in Britain asked the Institute to undertake a systematic action-research
study to evaluate the effects of introducing the apparently successful "Norwich
Experiment" into Bristol local prison before making policy decisions to diffuse
this system to all local prisons. This project was carried out by Emery (1970).
In contrast to the regime in conventional local prisons, the Norwich system
allowed inmates to spend most of their waking hours "in association" outside
their cells.

The research plan was jointly negotiated with the Commission, the gover-
nor and his staff, and the local branch of the prison officers' association. The
results showed that great improvements were gained by the new freedom of
association, but the creation of officer pairs linked to a group of inmates was
not feasible.

When he returned to Australia Emery took part, jointly with the prison
authorities in Western Australia, in the design, on small group principles, of a
new maximum security prison. Regular relations between a group of officers
and a group of prisoners now seemed possible. Socio-technical principles were
used to design the work organization of the prison.

Shortly after the new prison was built, the Director of Corrections died and
his successor did not implement the program in the way planned. Thus a major

opportunity to test out a model of great relevance to the future of penal institutions was lost.

The organizational change studies reported under this Theme are of long duration. Change takes time and unfolds in unexpected ways. The researcher cannot follow through the changes unless he is prepared to give a long term commitment to what he undertakes. Unless very much larger social systems are actively implicated and sanction changes made at a more local level, these are not likely to persist if they differ too widely from prevailing norms, as is illustrated in the back-sliding in the Australian prison innovation.

References

Emery, F.E. 1970. *Freedom and Justice Within Walls: The Bristol Prison Experiment.* London: Tavistock Publications.

Jaques, E. 1951. *The Changing Culture of a Factory.* London: Tavistock Publications. Reissued 1987, New York: Garland.

Trist, E.L., G.W. Higgin, H. Murray and A.B. Pollock. 1963. *Organizational Choice: Capabilities of Groups at the Coal Face Under Changing Technologies.* London: Tavistock Publications. Reissued 1987, New York: Garland.