CREATING PARTNERSHIP ORGANIZATIONS

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Contents

1. Unpacking the Patriarchy and Moving Into Partnership
2. The Partnership Alternative
2.1 The Shadow Side of Partnership
2.2 Fear of Change
2.3 Strategies for Organizational Change
3. Organizational Partnerships: The Living Proof
4. The Patterns and Paradox of Power
5. Leadership in a Partnership Context
5.1 Moving Beyond the Hero-Leader
5.2 Partnering Behaviors and Design Principles
6. Building the Partnership Community
7. Changing the Story
7.1 Transition Reframed as Initiation
7.2 Managing Successful Transitions
7.3 Summary and Conclusion
Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

UNESCO – EOLSS
SAMPLE CHAPTERS

Summary

Peace begins with each individual and grows within the fertile soil of our relationships with each other. Organizations provide the context for many of our most consuming and productive relationships. The patriarchal system, which is based on separation, discrimination, prejudice, domination, and control has been the "operating system" for traditional organizations of business, education, social welfare, and community groups for so long that most people are hard pressed to imagine another way of operating. Indeed, many people declare that the solution to organizational difficulties and economic disparities is to find a "better patriarch"—a strong leader who will force things to improve. There is growing recognition that in order to develop sustainable societies, organizations must develop different operating principles that support peaceful interactions and environmental accountability. This study focuses on an alternative that fosters both peaceful solutions to conflicts within organizations and leadership capacity building for all organizational partner-members. It requires changing organizational norms, revising the concept of leadership, and transforming the way power is distributed and applied in order to develop partnerships within systems of work and community. Various examples are given to illustrate the structure, policies,

and norms of the partnership organization. The process of transition is recognized as an important element of successful organizational change, and is explored in the context of indigenous rites of passage and organizational applications. It is recognized that in the sometimes-overwhelming global context where it is easy to feel vulnerable to those in control, we can recall Gandhi's exhortation that "We must be the change we want for the world." Together we can make a difference, and the model presented herein offers a place to start, with specific changes that can be made in the myriad organizations that collectively run our societies and command large portions of our time.

1. Unpacking the Patriarchy and Moving Into Partnership

In the context of complex, disruptive social challenges in the early twenty-first century, the traditional system of "power-over" domination is requiring ever-increasing infusions of regulation and punishment in order to remain in control. There is growing awareness among peacemakers in all nations of the need to find another way. Just as peacemaking requires more than the absence of war, so too organizational partnerships require more than changing organization charts or calling loosely confederated groups "teams." A transformation is called for, not to repair the existing crumbling organizational infrastructure, but to replace it. There is a need for an alternative that promotes a wider base of participation rather than relying on exclusivity, that fosters organizational partnerships rather than maintaining strict top-down hierarchies, and that sustains personal, visionary leadership committed to stewardship of resources rather than their exploitation for the benefit of a select few.

As global citizens seeking to create conditions that support peace around the world, we are called to generate nonviolent societies where circles and communities of trust flourish, where collaboration replenishes our sense of security and direction, and where integrity grows from a larger sense of service to our shared progress. The alternative offered herein seeks to replace the current system and its faulty reliance on "might makes right" with a viable alternative.

This alternative—the partnership organization—is focused on the organizing principles that inform the structures affecting social enterprise: the agencies of governance, education, and social welfare, the corporations and small businesses that fuel global economies, and the community organizations that provide structure for a vast array of local initiatives. These structures are of particular importance because the majority of adults dedicate large amounts of their time and energy to their support, and because they affect virtually every aspect of life. Furthermore, organizations stand at the front lines of peacemaking efforts, where groups of individuals gather to work for social justice and environmental sustainability. The irony that these organizations often promote peace but operate in authoritarian, abusive ways to their members provides further impetus for this study. In this respect, the efforts toward creating partnership organizations represent peacemaking from the ground up.

In order to change the fundamental relationships within organizations, examining baseline understandings of leadership and power is critical. Furthermore, it is important to understand the strength of the system that provides the context and the structure for virtually all organizations. That system, arising from a mythic storyline parallel to that

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of the hero, is the patriarchy, an institutionalized social *system* based on competition, domination, and control.

Since the various and overlapping human rights movements in the 1960s, there has been growing recognition of the widespread effects of the patriarchal system. Social science researcher Cynthia Cockburn notes, "If the United Nations Decade of Women, 1975-1985, did nothing else it demonstrated the reality of patriarchy." The data on a variety of quality of life factors reveals detailed evidence of subordination around the world, particularly for women and minority groups. After a decade of United Nations' focus on the status of women, there was confirmation of just how hard it was to change anything. Cockburn concludes, "Patriarchy was real and it was durable." Not only is patriarchy real, it is *systemic*, structured, highly stable, and self-replicating.

Patriarchy's enduring capacity for self-preservation does not indicate that it is beneficial for anyone but those who are in control. Those who hold power in a dominating and controlling way have systematically disenfranchised millions of people—both women and men—who perceive very little hope of individually changing their circumstances.

In the context of this study, patriarchy does not refer to "those bad men." Indeed, the patriarchy could not have lasted so long and had such an overwhelming impact on our definitions of "good work" if it had not resonated at least to some degree with both men *and* women. Therefore, citizens in societies around the globe are responsible for privileging patriarchal ideologies to such a degree that it is difficult to imagine a viable alternative capable of dethroning it. Yet replace it we must, and given that we collectively shaped this biased and unjust worldview, then we are equally capable of crafting a viable alternative.

The patriarchal system has been the "operating system" for Eurocentric and Colonialist organizations for so long that wherever those belief systems are operative it is assumed to be a required element of any organization. Many people declare that the solution to organizational difficulties and economic disparities is to find a "better patriarch"—a strong leader who will force things to improve. In the organizational context, this pervasive religion of power is vested in hierarchical structures, top-down decision-making policies, separation of workers based on status and technical demarcations, and limited roles based on relative positioning within the standardized pyramidal organizational chart. Classic organizations position the most valued roles at the top of the pyramid. Correlating management styles require that the players involved maintain some distance and show emotional detachment in order to protect their ability to effectively supervise and control those below them.

Much has been written in recent years about the need for radical transformation of our organizations. These studies, largely motivated by efforts to increase access to basic civil rights, have tracked ever-increasing organizational complexities, global economic demands for increased flexibility, and escalating incidences of international and interethnic warfare that disrupt markets and provision of basic human services. From the partnership perspective, all of these factors call for increased cross-cultural sensitivity and peacemaking efforts. Many have called for increased gender equity as a means of addressing the problems within organizations, which are in turn reflective of the

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societies that host those organizations. There is also awareness that women are sometimes the strongest contributors to the hierarchical system, once they have achieved some measure of power within the organization. Clearly, the greatest challenge lies not in just changing the gender balance of the workforce, but in changing the core organizational culture, which is comprised of an implicit mixture of policies, procedures, roles, and norms.

In the midst of polarizing debates about how best to proceed in the face of escalating global violence and eroding natural resources, we must take responsibility both individually and collectively to step away from perpetuating the patriarchal system. Sociologist Allan Johnson contends that contrary to popular belief, "We aren't simple prisoners of a socially constructed reality." He explains, "Reality is being constructed and reconstructed all the time, and the part we play in that, however small, gives us the chance and the responsibility to choose in ways that might make a difference." Eventually, each person choosing to make changes contributes to reaching the "tipping point" where patriarchal forms and values begin to lose their obvious legitimacy and normalcy. The partnership alternative represents a new form that is emerging to challenge the privileged place of the patriarchal system. Thus, in the sometimes-overwhelming context where it is easy to feel vulnerable to those in control, we can recall Gandhi's exhortation that "We must be the change we want for the world." Together we can make a difference, and the model presented herein offers a place to start, with specific changes in the myriad organizations that collectively run our societies and command large portions of our time.

The partnership alternative is an inclusive system of "power-with," where all voices have both the right and the power to be heard—not just the commanding voices of those in charge—and where all individuals have full membership in their communities—no matter what their gender, race, religion, age, sexuality, or abilities. This shift represents admittedly massive movement within widely held worldviews. As Jean Houston observes, this different way of living, working, and governing together will require "movement from the egocentric and the ethnocentric to the worldcentric. Critical to this reformation is a true partnership society, in which women join men in the full social agenda." Such a society invites and celebrates equally both feminine and masculine expressions of our collective humanity. Within the partnership model, people come together to participate fully and practically in shared expressions of service and expanded definitions of progress. Leadership is drawn away from the preoccupation with maintaining power over others, and recognized as an opportunity for involvement by individuals at all levels of the organization, regardless of its mission.

By developing a shared vision and alternative organizational operating principles, individuals can gain a sense of hope that things can be different and of direction for how to make the necessary organizational changes. Groups can begin by creating dialogue circles and support communities that function in a coordinated way to both protest injustices and develop new answers.

This transformation is possible in spite of corporate monopolies with vested interests in maintaining patriarchal hierarchies, or fundamentalists waging a backlash against women and minority groups seeking to share power, or widespread fear that paralyzes

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progress toward these essential changes. In part this transformation is achieved by providing training and consistent mentoring that builds personal leadership capacity and communication skills in both organizations and schools, and by carefully reworking core organizational power structures, so that many people, rather than a few at the top, are genuinely empowered and stand ready to take responsibility for helping navigate organizations and communities through the necessary transitions.

This call for a cultural transformation at the root level of our organizations represents a fundamental shift in how we relate as human beings. This is an opportunity to weave a new pattern modeled on the Buddhist philosophy of "inter-being" that calls forth our deepest desires for meaningful work, for positive, productive relationships based on mutual trust and respect, and for creating a hopeful—and peaceful—future.

2. The Partnership Alternative

Partnership represents a radically different model from the patriarchal system of competition, domination, and control. It challenges the old rules wherein the designated head of the family, the organization, or the nation holds absolute power. The very notion that power and authority could be shared is at first confusing to many people, which is why there is a need for both examples of how it works and for widespread skill development in dialogue and collaborative decision-making.

Partnership is rooted in building relationships based on cooperation, in a concerted effort to operate with the dynamics of "power-with." In turn, those relationships, freed of the dynamics of "power-over" and the fear of abuse and violence, are able to develop within a consciously crafted climate of balance and mutual respect. Rather than promoting expectations to put up, go along, and be the patriarchal version of the "team player" blindly supporting the will of the ruler, partnership actually provides a container for asking questions and for fully engaged participation that promotes both individual and collective growth. The partnership model is based on connecting and relating, rather than separating and ranking, and on collaboration and shared progress, rather than competition and winner-takes-all.

Adopting a partnership philosophy and practice involves shifting from an exclusive system emphasizing rank-based constraint and control to one that invites widely creative, varied, and even contradictory opinions and ideas, while consciously preventing exclusive control by any one narcissistic group with its narrow unimaginative ideology. Partnership in any group setting also requires shifting from a regime of command and control that depends on secrecy, coercion, and compliance into a system that obligates openness and responsibility. Additionally, partnership educates for and rewards involvement, and it consistently seeks both the participation and the willing support of all members in the organization or the society. When those changes are instituted, then there can be a conscious and careful reweaving of the previously severed threads of community.

Research is providing a growing body of evidence that partnerships can be and are successful, even in the face of strong dominator resistance. Organizations that are functioning within the partnership paradigm generally tend to share a common set of

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characteristics, as outlined by Riane Eisler and Alfonso Montuori. They note that partnership organizations have flatter, less rigidly hierarchical structures, and that where hierarchies do exist they are "hierarchies of actualization" that encourage innovation, flexibility, and individual initiative. The role of the manager is dramatically changed "from 'the cop' to a facilitator" who provides "transformational and empowering leadership" that seeks to help workers develop their full potential. At the core, the concept of power is changed from coercive, "power-over" manipulations that operate at the expense of others to generative, "power-with" relationships that seek to identify and implement the most effective ways of working together to solve problems.
Partnership organizations view the human beings who work within them very differently than do patriarchal, hierarchical organizations. Strictly hierarchical organizations consider workers to be resources that can be exploited for the benefit of the organizational entity, and when they get burned out, they can be easily replaced with younger, less expensive, more malleable individuals. Partnership organizations, on the other hand, consider workers as people with skills and unique perspectives and insights that are to be nurtured, rather than as material resources to be used and disposed of.

Rather than perceiving human diversity as a threat to the established order, it is reframed as an opportunity that can provide greater creativity and innovation. Eisler and Montuori note that this "presents possibilities for unusual and generative cross-pollinations." Within that context, redefined, permeable gender roles are particularly important, in that "individuals who are not trapped in rigid stereotypical gender roles tend to be more flexible and psychologically healthy. They also tend to find it easier to work with others in teams rather than merely assuming positions in rank orderings," which too often reflect traditional gender stereotypes. Both workers and volunteers who experience more flexible ways of perceiving and interacting with others within organizations are less likely to resort to high levels of absenteeism and turnover as coping strategies, and more likely to experience high levels of morale and productivity.

Fortunately, excellent examples of applied partnerships already exist, as is apparent in a growing number of model organizations across the spectrum of society. There are resources for those interested in partnership parenting, schools that offer collaborative, experiential learning models, and organizations that have consciously dismantled top-down authoritarianism while providing training in communication, partnering, and alternate problem-solving and conflict transformation skills. As Eisler notes, "The movement toward partnership is at the heart of innumerable causes," which "transcend conventional categories such as communism versus capitalism and religious versus secular," even though, without a name or commonly recognized identity, this movement is not widely reported in the media.

2.1 The Shadow Side of Partnership

Along with examining those organizations, it is important to consider potential limits to their development. Does partnership also have a *shadow* side? Yes, in that without careful elucidation, strongly supported meeting agreements, and amplified communication, facilitation, and conflict management skills, the illusion of partnership provides those who would passive-aggressively pretend to support needed changes—but still seek to manipulate and retain control—with yet another mechanism for holding the

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group hostage. Indeed, some organizational managers fluently speak the language of partnership while actively (sometimes covertly) derailing emergent efforts to achieve it.

For example, collaborative decision-making represents a dramatic change from vertical chains of command, where workers are treated as disposable cogs in the wheel of progress. Among the variety of alternative decision-making processes that can be employed, the most well known is consensus, wherein everyone is encouraged to voice their perspectives and opinions. Yet consensus itself can be abused, when universally applied. The shift toward partnership organizations should not be confused with a simplistic, flat structure where everything is run by consensus. Indeed, within a strict consensual framework those persuasive, controlling managers who hold the threat of retaliation can easily manipulate those who do not fully understand the principles and processes involved in operating in full partnership, or who do not trust their own voices or the new paradigm.

In any situation, using consensus can be very perplexing without accompanying training in dialogue and facilitation. Without attending to fundamental understandings and commonly accepted behavior standards, organizational members who are new to full participation can all too easily fall into the trap of "groupthink" or get caught in the mire of planning and decision-making that still reflects fundamental turf protection. When that occurs, even as those same managers loudly proclaim their allegiance to so-called "team-building efforts," they demand adherence to their own interpretation of cooperation or team, and subsequently co-opt employee trust. Understandably frustrated employees then dismiss this latest effort to change how things work as simply another fad without real change or lasting substance.

The understanding that partnership does not work by merely changing organizational structures, titles, and policies is absolutely critical to its success. Shifting toward partnership does not represent a complete swing to the opposite pole, as represented by a laissez-faire, everyone-do-what-they-want style in a totally horizontal or structureless workplace. Nor does it mean all workers receive exactly the same pay, or rotating management between everyone. On the contrary, it involves clear expectations, standards, and guidelines, with an understanding that there are different levels of compensation—although the range between the lowest and highest compensation is reduced.

Within a truly partnership organization, all individuals are there by choice, and are able take part in the decisions about what role they play, how they work together, and how both the work and the organization are structured. In order to incorporate those levels of involvement, there must be a complementary, coordinated effort to examine and change the attitudes, beliefs, actions, and norms within organizations in order to fully support the proposed new structures and policies.

2.2 Fear of Change

The fear for those considering a move away from dominator hierarchies and into partnership is that there will be chaos, anarchy, and the failure of a structure-less organization. At its heart, people fear a lack of control. Top managers will ask, "How

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will we get anything done? How do you expect us to run a profitable business?" Rank and file employees likewise fear the perceived lack of order, asking, "What am I supposed to do? How will I know that I'm doing a good job? Who will lead the way?" From that perspective, powerlessness and lack of control become synonymous.

That fear exposes the overwhelming suspicion of anything that challenges the prevailing order, no matter how flawed we may believe it to be. It also calls the question on how little we understand about creating and sustaining true partnerships. Yet knowledge of partnerships coupled with skills in open communication are the antecedents to our shared progress. Given common misunderstandings about what partnership is or how it operates, it is easy to see how fears of rampant turmoil, not to mention more obsessive beliefs in the threat of unfathomed and often-maligned socialism, cause insecurity among those faced with major changes in operating systems. For this reason, the movement to true partnership organizations requires a courageous mix of knowledge, skill, imagination, and perseverance.

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Biographical Sketch

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