

"By combining the best of both men's and women's models, an entirely new paradigm can be created, one that holds the promise of creating wholeness and balance for organizations struggling to adapt to the challenges of change."

In the Company of Women

Complementary Ways of Organizing Work

By Carlotta Tyler

STRUGGLING DOWN THE cellar stairs with a forty-pound laundry basket at the end of a long day in the 1970's I said to myself "I wonder where the laundry would be located if a woman had designed this house?" This laundry epiphany prompted a later observation in graduate school, "How come there aren't any women in these research populations defining leadership?" My next thought was "How would these organizations look if they were designed by women?" These questions illustrate the threshold of perception a woman crosses in recognizing the existence of a pervasive paradigm that does not include her. Once awakened, a casual scan of the nightly news will confirm the fact that the viewpoints of her half of the human population, are rarely included in the crucial debates and decisions being made on the global stage

Models are representations of key concepts and operating principles. When applied to organizations, they indicate what we pay attention to when we gather to do work. The predominant organization models that we use today were historically designed by men, in the West, by white men. As a consequence,

they reflect male values and favor rewarding masculine behaviors. This fact has generally been overlooked in discussions of organizations. To seek answers to these questions I spent two decades applying a gender lens to the structure and dynamics, the look and feel of organizations through sponsored¹ research

CONFERENCE CONNECTION



Carlotta R. Tyler is a presenter at the 2002 OD Network Annual Conference in Montreal at the following sessions:

FS101 Strengthening and Deepening Female Leadership: An Experiential Intensive for Women

with **Rita J. Andrews, Rosemary A. Bova, Judith Noel and Nancy Voss**

Friday, 1-5pm and Saturday, 8-4pm

which I conducted from 1981 to 1997 with over 1500 women leaders in public and private sector organizations on four continents². The forms of organizing studied were formal and informal, since women's work transcends the standard definition of workplaces. The structures studied ranged from the predominating male-defined ones, through women-owned businesses with mixed management, to women-only businesses. It was in the latter group that the clearest manifestation of women's unique modes of work emerged. The field study concentrated on twelve women-owned and women-only work structures. From the research findings and field applications I conclude that:

- Women's ways of conceptualizing and organizing to do work are essentially different from men's;
- Those ways are complementary, not competitive. By combining the best of both men's and women's models, an entirely new paradigm can be created, one that holds the promise of creating wholeness and balance for organizations struggling to adapt to the challenges of change;
- To transform traditional models will require examination of the core beliefs we bring to, and find reflected in, the design and operation of our organizations.

EXPLORING WOMEN AND MEN'S WAYS OF ORGANIZING TO DO WORK

This research explores the emerging models of the other half and views them as complementing existing models. Since we are familiar with the historically male-derived organization, we will primarily focus on the emerging female form.

Women's Ways of Organizing

The work environments conceived and developed by women were found to reflect a preference for organic structure and collaborative operation where the flow of the work defines the form of the organization and information is shared freely among members, without attachment to functional position. Context and processes are characterized by a strong commitment to values, with particular attention to building relationships in order to establish the trust needed to accomplish complex tasks. When women design and operate the organization, they pay attention to process as well as outcomes and describe operations in unique language, symbols and metaphors.

The Embryonic Model: An Organic Design

Let us enter this new territory through the experience of a national woman's service organization that successfully transformed their purpose, structure and operation using a consciously feminine model. Their challenge was to reinvent an eighty-year old, hierarchically structured institution that had lost focus, commitment and participation while retaining a nationwide membership, dedicated staff and generous endowment. They successfully met the challenge by using the organization design process to transform the energy as well as the focus of the organization from a static hierarchy to a dynamic embryonic form.

They began by envisioning the new organization as a success in a weekend process that gave form to what it would take to get to that state. Next they aligned their personal values with the organization's to determine three principles that guided the redesign process:

- question all existing organizational standards and structures, processes and procedures, language and symbols for congruence with women-centered values which were defined as cooperation, interdependence, inclusiveness, and process-orientation.
- adopt "a level glance" in all deliberations acknowledging a female preference for status-level vs. status-enhancing interactions. This approach posited webs of connection that viewed staff and board members as peers rather than hierarchies that rank people by function, or what Dr. Deborah Tannen would call the female desire for "symmetrical connection".
- use a collaborative model where system-wide inputs would be sought and aired, a collaborative approach to decision-making would be utilized, experimentation and learning from errors would be encouraged and attention would be given to process as well as task.

AUTHOR

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As experimentation with the structure and operation progressed, the organization chart underwent a startling metamorphosis, from the standard linear, segmented boxes to circles, named "spheres of influence", to an organic interrelationship of functions.

Several functions considered critical to the survival of the organization were moved to the center of the evolving design. A staff member was placed where two or more functions overlapped, an effective deployment of this limited resource. The system evolved into the organic interrelationship of functions, shown in Figure 2, and generally referred to as "the embryo."

A picture of the redesign was continually updated and kept before the planners, on their office walls and on their kitchen refrigerators, throughout the process. The use of an evolving visual was key to the success of the initiative. It served to record the progress, to stimulate further evolution of the design and to concretize the mental vision.

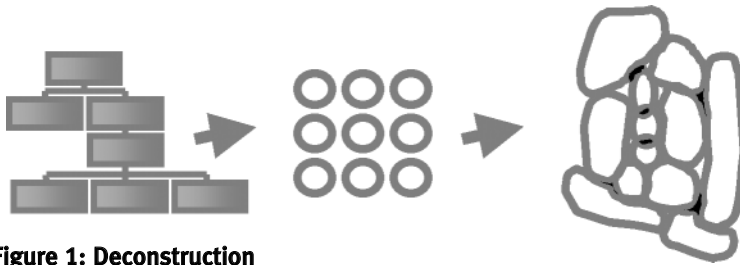


Figure 1: Deconstruction

Flow Determines Form

The critical point in the restructuring was committing to the design, a point where many organization redesigns flounder. To do this the women employed a manifestation of the mind-body connection in which intuition is employed to support feelings in a process of "being with" a situation or event. This is a process natural to women which I call "female embodiment." In this case the planners immersed themselves in the imagined flow of both an ordinary day and a crisis situation to test the functionality of the restructured design. They described this process as getting a feel for the dynamics of how the work flowed through the proposed structure. Joanna Macy, an environmental educator, writes of this capability as female internalization of external events. In her workshops, women repeatedly described environmental degradation not as an intellectual concept but as a physical experience which some called the rape of the planet. After the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, several of my female coaching clients spoke of their inability to watch the televised replay as the impact of the plane on the Twin Tower evoked a physical reaction described by one as a blow to her body.

By sensing the relationship of the functions of the organization in this way, the roles needed to operationalize the design became clear to the planners. It also became clear that two functions, finance and communication, were pivotal to the success of the reinvented organization because they enable and define the system where it interfaces with the outside world. These functions were repositioned to surround the operational core with a permeable membrane marking this critical boundary. By intuiting alterations to the structure in this organic way, buy-in is incremental and on-going and continues today.



Figure 2: "The Embryo"

The implications of female embodiment for organization strategizing are exciting and profound. Observing the women planner's merge with the imagined flow of the system to sense its dynamic potential expands the scope of traditional organization design. This application of intuition was purposeful and acknowledged as an important component of the redesign. In the process of arriving at an internalized, felt sense the women employed two female strengths: keen understanding of relational dynamics and ultimate reliance on inner authority in decision-making. Contemporary behavioral science studies highlight both as proclivities of females. (Gilligan, Fletcher)

THE ROLE OF FEMALE-REFERENT LANGUAGE

Another unique outcome of applying a feminine consciousness to organization design was the use of nature-based language to describe the dynamic they wanted to achieve using metaphors drawn mainly from botany and biology. From the beginning, the board and staff wanted to reframe the impersonal, analytical language traditionally used in strategic planning. They saw it as creating a distance between the planners and the system. Instead, they called the strategic planning process "midwifing the new organization". Surveying stakeholder inputs was "tilling the soil." Actions to improve effectiveness were named "nurturing" and increases in funding were "watering" the system. Marketing was renamed "seeding", new programs were called "buds", established programs, "flowers", new initiatives, "petals." The reinvented organization came into being.

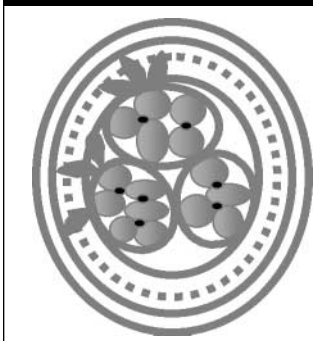


Figure 3: The Reinvented Organization

I have noticed that women in groups are conscious of language and frequently adapt current usage to better describe their ideas and experience. I suggest that this reflects at least two dimensions of women's reality: 1) The language, symbols, metaphors used in society and at work are predominately male-referent and can feel alien to women. The majority of women can't identify with generalizations used, for example that "Throughout history, mankind has gone to war to settle disputes.", or in the exhortation given to the sales staff of one organization to "tackle their new accounts", an action foreign to most women. 2) Women tend to use nature-based language and metaphors to express their profound experience of connecting to their life force through the cycles of nature and to the body in a mind-body awareness.

Collaboration in Action: Relationship-based Decision-Making

Findings suggest that women with a history of being an intact group do some amazing problem-solving. One group studied was six women who wanted to travel at personal expense to Santa Fe for an important meeting. They were of varying economic means and did not want cost to be a reason to exclude anyone's participation. The women had built trust over seven years by periodically engaging in a process of sharing and listening to the details of one another's lives and careers, devoid of judgement or unsolicited advice. Based on this established relationship, they devised a collaborative decision-making process that they had used on five subsequent journeys.

First they determined what they needed for the trip, including food, lodging, transportation and a "wish list" of activities. Next, priorities were determined by consensus. Then, a cost was determined for each aspect of the trip. The total cost was announced. Seated in a circle, members reflected silently on their commitment to making the journey and their individual economic situation. Each member then wrote on a piece of paper what she could afford to contribute and put the paper in the center of the table. Some of the anonymous contributions were hundreds of dollars, some thousands. Each was based on an honest assessment of the individual's ability to pay. The total was fifty dollars in excess of the required amount.

Key aspects of this collaborative approach show up in all of the women's groups studied in my research. They are: 1) the high value given to inclusion, 2) building relationships before addressing complex tasks, 3) sharing personal as well as professional information, 4) relating as peers and 5) encouraging a continuous and open flow of information.

The Spiral: A Diffuse Idea Incubator

Women in the groups I studied pursue ideas in an expansive way. Conceptualized as a spiral, an ancient symbol for the female creative life force, the process women use moves from idea generation to attracting interest and involvement by sharing the ideas freely with the goal of attracting others. As Carol Frenier noted men use a focused consciousness, notice content and seek a finite solution. Women use a diffuse lens, notice context and remain open to multiple potential resolutions. The aim is not to settle on one idea and focus on one outcome, but to allow a multiplicity of ideas to emerge and expand, providing space for viable ideas to embed and grow.

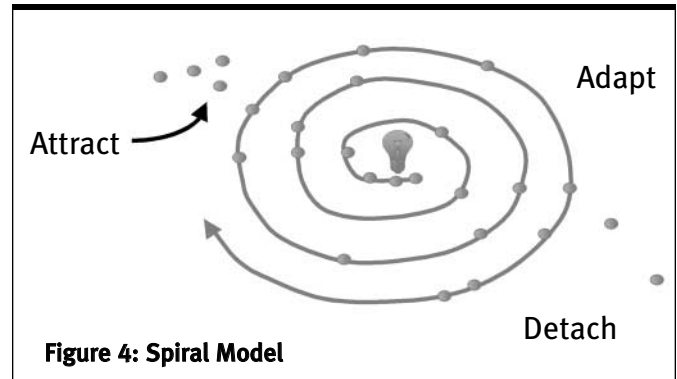


Figure 4: Spiral Model

Once attracted, members move in and out of these collaborative efforts over time based on situational responsibilities, which may include family care. Periodic detachment did not appear to negatively influence subsequent participation in the project. The spiral model is distinguished by and relies on collaboration, an open flow of information, experimentation and a willingness to both tolerate and learn from errors. This is accomplished by observing and sharing information on what's working and what isn't that result in adaptations to the flow and outcome of the process.

Men's Ways of Organizing

The work environments originated and developed by men can be seen to reflect a preference for hierarchical structures, with orders coming down from the top and reports moving up from the bottom. The leader is located at the top and access to information is stratified according to functional position or an informal network. Highly focused on results, this model can miss emerging factors critical to operations.

The Arrow: A Focused Dynamic

The arrow model, suggested by Bill Page, futurist, represents the linear, sequential progression of a concept from inception to completion. Direct, quantifiable and outcome focused, this is the standard applied in our society to accomplish work.

This basic model suggests the focused instrumentality of an arrow.

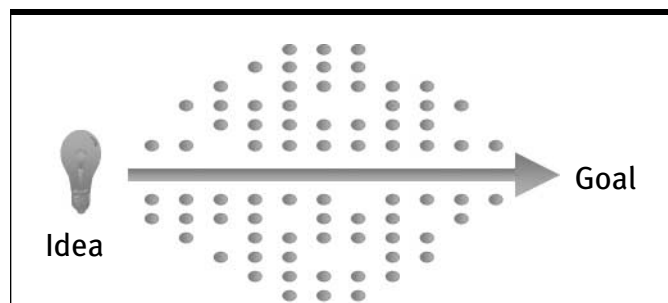


Figure 5: Arrow Model

The process has a beginning, a middle and an end. In the beginning, someone has an idea or a way to resolve a problem, provide a service, create a need and sets a goal for accomplishing that end. The person with the idea then attracts others to help reach the predetermined end-point. In the middle, progress is measured to assure that the work is on target to reach the goal. When the goal is achieved, the idea-generator owns the results and sells or certifies others to distribute it. From inception to completion, this sequential process is controlled for predictability and efficiency under close tolerances from which profit is derived. A mechanistic model, it requires a reliable supply of resources, both material and human; and it is proving to be too rigid for the requirements of rapid change and increased uncertainty that characterize today's marketplace.

A Natural Connection: The Models Mimic Nature

Quantum physics and folk wisdom tells us that "The whole is reflected in the parts" or "As above, so below." I suggest that the distinctive designs of men's and women's organizations reflect a hologram of their distinctive essence, including their reproductive function. Complementarity denotes a functional fit with the other half. It is why the male of the species is physiologically designed to fit the female in the act of creating new life. In the Asian understanding of yin and yang the two halves create a whole, not a polarity; they represent completion, not opposition.

Brain structure also differs in the male and the female. There is more connective tissue (corpus callosum) linking the left and right hemispheres of the female brain, increasing her capacity to switch from the left, linear, abstract hemisphere to the right, holistic, concrete hemisphere. The male brain has a preference for dealing with discrete events, sequentially. This primordial difference in brain structure leads to a facility for multi-tasking and whole pattern thinking in females and for focused, sequential thinking in males. The arrow model reflects the linear thinker, as does the standard organization chart. The spiral suggests the generative flow of the creative process, providing time and space for ideas to grow

Complementarity is reflected in the biological make-up of men and women. For example, in the construction of the visual mechanism of the eye, female rods have a capacity to see diffuse patterns and wholes and male cones have a capacity to focus discretely with specificity and acuity. (Ramsey, Shlain) These biological tendencies when applied to organizing to do work could result in an organization primed to scan for emerging trends while paying attention to bottom line results.



Figure 6: Generating and Achieving Innovations

If the arrow represents a direct route to effect an idea, the spiral represents a diffuse process of generating and refining a multiplicity of ideas. If the spiral is the incubator where ideas are conceived, nurtured and developed and the arrow is the vehicle that trans-

forms ideas into products and services, then combining the two would insure that great ideas are successfully grown and launched into the system. New ideas need a safe container where they can be tested and improved, where they can attract key support before being introduced into the organization, the society. Further, if we consider the spiral as an idea incubator it becomes a dynamic metaphor for the womb after conception. Here only viable ideas would embed and grow; since the womb rejects a conception that is seriously flawed. Therefore, ideas that emerge from such incubators are biased for quality and strength. To combine the spiral and the arrow is to capitalize on the strength of both.

Conversely, to encourage imbalance by encouraging one and discouraging the other is to court dysfunction. Most of us can recall efforts dominated by female ways of organizing that were so inclusive and emergent that they couldn't reach a decision and efforts dominated by male ways of organizing that were so focused on results that they missed important emerging factors.

THE CHALLENGE TO CHANGE AGENTS

If the organizations we serve are to achieve resilient, strong cultures able to capitalize on change they, and we, need to consider these challenges:

- **Transform our organizations and institutions by acknowledging that they are constructed on a base that capitalizes on only half of our human potential.**

The fact that the basic model for our organizations is male-defined goes all but unnoticed by today's organization design and development community. As a result, we do our work in a construct whose very invisibility threatens our ability to influence it, to improve its operation. In its many manifesta-

tions, whether public or private, business or bureaucracy, for profit or not, our organizations still reflect the thinking of the men who conceptualized and built them. The myth has been that the basic model is inclusive. If the numbers of senior women bailing out of corporations to start their own business is to be believed, one size does not fit all.

■ **Balance our systems by including the authentic feminine voice in arenas of decision-making.**

The authentic feminine voice is developed at the individual level through introspection on living life as a female and reflection on how that experience has affected ones impact on her world. This includes engaging at a physical, emotional and intellectual level with the impact of internalized cultural scripts for gender and external institutional sexism on her life choices. The goal of tilling this soil, which is not without suffering, is expanded consciousness. From the ground of her being comes the courage to speak the truth of a woman's knowing. A writer describes her efforts to access her feminine voice: "Gradually it dawned on me that I was unconsciously used to a masculine mentality and writing style. I was approaching the task through my head. I had to drop into my body...to balance masculine discrimination, rational, analytical, with feminine sensibility, empathy, feelings." (Simkinson)

■ **Go forward in wholeness by addressing and moving beyond ancient and global beliefs, deeply embedded in men and women, that regards the female as "less than" and essentially flawed.**

The original act of discrimination into "better than" and "less than" groups occurred between males and females thousands of years ago. It occurred on a global scale. This opinion about the relative value of humans by sex was conveyed primarily through religious tradition. The belief that males took precedence over females was later reinforced by the family and society. Over time, negative attributes were ascribed to being "less than". Females were considered to have less intelligence, less strength, less ability to complete any number of tasks from studying in school to leading nations. These views resulted in girls and women not being accorded equal status with boys and men, being considered essentially flawed. This

opinion prevailed in societies all over the world until late in the 20th Century. Ancient beliefs are deeply embedded and operating primarily below the level of consciousness in people. These beliefs do not go away at the office door.

Embracing Complementarity

Energy is gathering among people active in the important work of social justice and organization effectiveness. These are people who envision a world where a multiplicity of ideas are valued, where no single point of view dominates. These people are beginning to understand that the input of females is needed at top levels of public and private sector organizations and institutions. This is movement toward complementarity.

Key to the development of complementarity is the understanding that until girls and women are honored and valued society will not succeed in transforming the way we order life and structure organizations. Bringing the authentic voice of a critical mass of women into arena's of decision making will transform the way we operate our commerce and governance, our communities and our planet.

We need both halves of humanity to run a business, build a community, co-exist on the planet. ■

RELEVANT POSTSCRIPT

At lectures and presentations, I have been repeatedly asked why I use the words "male" and "female", "masculine" and "feminine"; why I don't use "less polarizing" terms to create more joining and less jolting, to be more team oriented and less threatening. It is because I want to keep before us the core issue at hand: the ancient, pervasive and largely unconscious devaluing of the human female. As a result, I am

concerned that some male decision-makers in institutions and organizations will assume that the desirable attributes observed in female ways of working can be appropriated by males, thereby obviating the need to adapt to include "the other". I am concerned that women will continue to populate middle and lower levels of management and therefore some will see themselves as fit only to serve in support roles in organizations and in life. I am concerned that both men and women will continue

The fact that the basic model for our organizations is male-defined goes all but unnoticed by today's organization design and development community. As a result, we do our work in a construct whose very invisibility threatens our ability to influence it, to improve its operation. In its many manifestations, whether public or private, business or bureaucracy, for profit or not, our organizations still reflect the thinking of the men who conceptualized and built them.

to be suspicious of women's capabilities for top leadership of our society, thereby supporting the status quo.

The source of this concern is to be found in the numbers and their consistency over time. Women are not rising to the top of the major organizations that perform the world's commerce and governance in numbers that reflect their fifty-one percent of the population of the world, their decades of experience as contributors in mainstream organizations or their substantial educational qualifications. Women in the U.S. are still only 3% of CEO's and 18% of Congress forty years after passage of the Civil Rights Act. At a time in history when the voices of women are needed for global decisions affecting every aspect of their and their children's lives including the environment, globalization and it's impact on women laborers, the conduct of war, they are noticeable in their absence, their exclusion. Until a critical mass of females are welcomed into arenas of decision-making, transformation will elude our best efforts.

This article is part of a book in process.

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NOTES

1. Research sponsored by the Massachusetts Women's Political Caucus, the Institute for International Research, London and Dragonfarm, Inc, Maine.
2. Conducted in Australia, Canada, England, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Ireland, Malaysia, New Zealand, Scotland, Singapore, Thailand and the United States.