

HEALING THE WOUNDED ORGANIZATION: THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN CREATING THE PATH TO SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Abstract

When organizations do not attend to social justice issues in a meaningful way, a pattern of covert practices and behavior distorts the concern for fairness, equity and inclusion to one of indifference, power and control. Ineffective leadership results in wounded staff and organizational dysfunction. Social justice in organizational life is a function of how well leaders and managers master six domains that influence and sustain institutional balance and self-regulation: safety and trust; boundaries and differences; accountability; communication; hierarchical power; and task and role clarity. Ultimately, leaders must do their own inner work by taking responsibility for their part in institutionalizing oppression in their organizations, and well as the outer work of creating processes and structures that implement solutions to social justice issues within their organizations.

Keywords: Leadership and Social Justice, Social Justice in Organizations, Wounded Organizations, Safety and Trust in Organizations, Accountability Structures, Boundaries in Organizations, Hierarchy and Power, Role and Task Clarity, Communication and Participation

Introduction

This paper explores the role of leadership in creating and sustaining healthy organizations. Organizations that are healthy tend to be places where social justice principles are practiced. "Social justice as an end state is the vision of a society that upholds the values of equity, inclusion, fairness [and] human dignity,

providing equal access to opportunities and the pursuit of happiness for all the diverse social identity groups" (NTL Institute, 2009). This definition points to a paradox, that the pursuit of joy or happiness inherently assumes equal opportunity and, therefore, equity across the spectrum of community and organizational life. However, as

experienced or observed situations attest, there is no joy where people feel violated or abused; no inclusion where people feel discriminated against; and no equity where people feel systematically disempowered and marginalized. In the place of joy and happiness, then, we find anger, sorrow and depression.

To be clear, there can be no social justice where people are systematically mistreated. At the organizational level, when organizations fail to incorporate social justice values in a meaningful way, a pattern of covert practices and behavior shifts the emphasis from a concern for fairness, equity and inclusion to indifference, hierarchical power and control. When that happens, and people do not feel that the organization – embodied by management – cares about them, focus on service delivery slips away and is replaced with survival strategies.

This paper concerns itself with where and how social justice principles break down in the organization, leaving workers to feel like the victims of a management system gone awry. It is also about the role of leadership within the dysfunctional organization, and how leadership can take up its mantle to heal the system.

Organizational Dysfunction and Wounding

To understand the dysfunctional system, we need to understand the relationship between organizations and the people comprising them. Human resource theorists (Argyris, 1957, 1974) (McGregor, 1960) point out that managers in organizations tend to treat employees like children. Employees, on the other hand, show up needing to be treated like adults. Since organizations and people need each other, the challenge is to create a fit for these conflicting tendencies and needs. Otherwise one or the other – management or staff – will be exploited. Managers/leaders and employees must be re-educated to get the best for both. Failure leads to dysfunctional organizations and dysfunctional (wounded) people (Bolman & Deal, 1991).

Healthy organizational environments are places where people feel valued for their contributions, have access to information that helps them understand what is needed and feel safe enough to express their difference in a way that invites participation and diverse perspectives. Healthy organizations have some if not all of these characteristics: participative management, collaboration, decision making that reflects the input of those that will be affected by the decisions and conflict management that creates

opportunities for dialogue so differences can be worked out before they go underground or emerge as crisis. Most importantly, the organization establishes structures and fosters processes to assure that it learns from its experiences and its errors, and does not repeat costly mistakes. Fundamental to the healthy organization, then, is the environment where people feel free to speak their truth and to believe that they will be heard. Clear communication with integrity is the essential ingredient in each of the practices connected with health in organizations. In their book *Transparency: How Leaders Create a Culture of Candor*, Bennis, Goleman and O'Toole (2008) point out that "an organization's capacity to compete, solve problems, innovate, meet challenges and achieve goals varies to the degree that information flow remains healthy. That is particularly true when the information consists of crucial but hard-to-take facts that leaders may bristle at hearing and that subordinates too often and understandably play down, disguise or ignore. For information to flow freely, followers must feel free to speak openly and leaders must welcome such openness" (Bennis et al. 2008, pg. 3-4).

Communications challenges are mitigated in organizations where staff is motivated by a common commitment.

Indeed, social justice values are often what attract people to these organizations and shared commitment underpins a cohesive environment. Most social service and health agencies that provide services to clients that are disenfranchised fall into this category, including women's shelters, agencies working with troubled children and adolescents, hospitals – particularly those serving high proportions of immigrants and indigent populations – drug and alcohol programs, school systems and mental health systems. As the organization grows, however, sustaining the social justice agenda, maintaining a cohesive culture and meeting the objectives of the service task become a major challenge. In *The Casualty Syndrome* (Braxton, 1996), I point out that social service organizations often evolve out of a commonly held set of social justice values and ideals. These ideals are embodied in the staff and, when the organization is small, are interwoven throughout the relational culture, serving as a powerful motivating and unifying force. Indeed, the relationally reinforced values attract people with shared, passionate beliefs in the humane and personal aspects of the work. However, in order to grow, the organization's focus must shift to planning, staff acquisition and retention and institution building. Social justice values – primarily reinforced

through a relational context – get lost in the focus on the organization’s broader goals of growth and expansion; personal passion gets lost in the pressure of increasing demands on an expanding service system and a more refined organizational structure. At this juncture, communications challenges – which are characterized by a blocked flow of information (Bennis et al., 2008) – compound stresses to the system.

Anne Tapp (2006) speaks firsthand about how a women’s shelter, the Boulder County Safehouse, lost touch with its own social justice roots and evolved into an organization that “looked and functioned like many battered women’s programs” (Tapp, 2006, p. 2), where referrals were made by government and a network of human service organizations, advocacy efforts were almost exclusively concerned with the criminal justice system, there was a narrow approach to fund raising, and the faces of the predominantly Caucasian staff did not much look like those of the women they served. Looking critically at itself, the organization saw “a movement born of inspiration and tamed by institutionalization . . . [in what becomes] the predictable consequence of a social justice movement’s slide from activism to service-delivery” (Tapp, 2006, p.3). Dissatisfied with what it had become and

the results of what it was doing, the shelter set about a fundamental return to its guiding principles, redesigning the organization with a broader and fundable advocacy mission and a Board and management that was more representative of the communities they served. The reorganization saw turnover halved and a renewed focus on service delivery that was closely aligned with a relevant and robust social justice agenda.

Not all systems reorganize and renew with the passion and unity of purpose displayed by the Boulder Safehouse Progressive for Nonviolence. What happens, instead, is that the organization becomes too large to involve everyone in the same way it once did, and balance gets lost as the service system grows faster than the infrastructure to support it. At this stage, people begin to become the casualties (Braxton, 1996) of institutionalization – either overtly through loss of job, or covertly through loss of role and/or authorization. A third way the unbalancing manifests itself is through the emergence – with management’s overt or covert sanction – of fiefdoms, which suboptimize both the organization’s mission and its resources. These fiefdoms also become the places from which intergroup warfare is waged. As balance is lost equity is diminished, and diminishing equity further unbalances the

organization. The breakdown of organizational culture and the failure of leadership to intervene in a timely way results in a dysfunction, or wounding, that occurs at both the individual and the organizational levels. Wounded staff that have become casualties are unable to deliver what organizations need to thrive and grow, and crisis often ensues – particularly if further expansion is initiated – fueling a damaging spiral. The primary focus of effective intervention at this stage is to create change at the organizational level: to create an environment where people feel safe, can engage productively, are held accountable for their behavior, and can thrive and grow. The temptation to begin to fix individuals – the leader, his/her management team, or perceived troublemakers – without linking their work to the vision and goals of the organizational change process usually does not work, yielding short-term results, at best.

Organizations are systems that contain multiple elements, all of which must work together in an interdependent relationship to accomplish a service or work task. Similar to the practice of Multicultural Organization Development described by Bailey Jackson (Jackson, 2006), the intervention strategy being advocated here is to target the organizational level to impact both the

individuals and the organizational culture. Organization culture is the set of values that enables people to understand which actions are acceptable or unacceptable. In the cases that follow, the organization's culture has contributed to the wounding of individuals, as social justice principles have long been absent. The interventions described are grounded in an approach that focuses on understanding and changing the structures so that people can be sustained, guided and enabled to work productively. Healing the woundedness is a primary step in this process.

Six Domains in the Context of Organizational Change

Six domains are offered as a model for intervening in the organization's system to create or restore the conditions under which social justice values can thrive. Each domain holds some portion of the system that is crucial to sustaining balance and self-regulation, and each builds on the others to create interlocking support for those values. The six domains are grounded in the organization development literature (e.g., Bolman & Deal, 1991; selections from Jones & Brazzel, Eds., 2006; Klein, 1959) and the author's more than three decades of organization development practice.

Domain One – Safety and Trust

Safety is the most basic condition for healing a wounded system. The work environment duplicates the family system, in that it is the source of security and the means to make a living, both of which people equate with survival. When the organizational environment is experienced as dangerous, unstable or potentially abusive, people become preoccupied with survival tactics that they believe will protect them and their jobs. Under these conditions, work becomes less important than survival. When survival concerns eclipse the concerns for factual discourse and truth, they compromise effectiveness, productivity, reliability and trust. Inadequate channels for formal communication and a rampant informal *grapevine* are telling signs that a system is in survival mode, since communication is one of the first casualties of a broken system.

Creating a safe environment is crucial, then, to moving the organization toward stability and the capacity to reflect on its own processes so it can learn from its experiences and choose not to repeat them. The group or system must provide a *holding environment* so people can begin to feel safe (Kaplan, 1978). The concept of *holding* is a metaphor for the experience a developing fetus has in its mother's womb, where it is held in a

secure environment safe enough to allow survival and growth. A holding environment creates the conditions under which an organization can grow and expand while sustaining a healthy, trusting and open communication structure. It is also the basic condition necessary to enable a wounded system to heal itself.

Case #1: Safety and Trust Domain: A Holding Environment in Action

A select faculty group within an urban university's school of education was asked to design a new *leading teacher's* program. The group was comprised of faculty from all school departments. A consultant/facilitator was engaged almost two years into the design process, near the end of the project funding cycle. The design process had stalled, and individuals within the faculty group indicated that clashing personalities and covert agendas had overtaken the group's ability to forge clear agreements and make further progress. Since the group was working on behalf of the larger faculty, there were also problems concerning representation, authorization, task clarity, goals and outcomes. The most crucial issues, however, involved trust, disagreements among subgroups with competing agendas, goals at cross-purposes and a strong patriarchal subtext.

To get the group moving, the consultant needed to create structures that 1) supported the group in staying task-focused; 2) allowed people to feel heard; 3) respected all views and inputs; 4) allowed engagement of differences. The consultant modeled the appropriate behaviors by first listening carefully and making it clear that everyone had something of value and importance to say. He validated each person's input and protected everyone's right to be heard by establishing a few ground rules to redirect the more vocal group members, and insure that no one member of the group took up too much air time. It was also important to reinforce the best in all participants by playing to their strengths rather than their weaknesses. One faculty member had a reputation for being pushy and disrespectful of others. However, as the consultant observed this behavior he noticed that this participant had useful insights when he spoke, and – like everyone else in the group – needed to feel listened to and heard. As the participant began to feel valued for his contribution, his disruptive behavior abated and he became one of the more productive members of the group. Other group members had a similar response when they were treated as valued participants and held accountable because their input was needed. Once the

consultant demonstrated that he could and would hold the space on behalf of the work the group came to do, the group began to feel safe enough to risk doing it.

In addition to the internal dynamics affecting the holding environment, the design group struggled with the legacy of its relationship to the larger faculty group. The rules for faculty representation were unclear and ambiguous. Structures and procedures for decision making were ineffective until authorization and representation were clarified. Once *input* was distinguished from *decision making* the group could be clear about how and when to be decisive on behalf of those it represented.

As this example demonstrates, a holding environment exists when clear structures allow people to feel seen and heard, and leadership is exercised to protect group members from abuse and intrusion. When the atmosphere shifts to one of transparency and possibility, group members sense a more level playing field and are more likely to risk expressing and working through their differences. With the consultant's interventions, group members were able to work through their differences and the project's outcome was ultimately quite successful; some participants were able to apply what they learned in the process to other leadership roles they took up later within the system.

Once an organization manifests systemic breakdowns, it is not likely to launch a successful recovery process on its own unless individuals feel that the environment is safe enough to risk revealing their truths. One of the critical roles of leadership is to create and anchor the space that is safe enough for differences to emerge. This condition facilitates the dialogue necessary to permit deeper issues to surface and creates an environment secure enough for people to risk expressing and exploring those differences that lead to new possibilities.

Domain Two – Boundaries and Differences

Boundaries are at the heart of much of the pain people experience in organizational life. Boundaries define the beginning and ending points between persons, tasks, time and territory. In group dynamics, a boundary is a region of control that provides physical and/or psychological demarcation of the group, determining who is included and regulating transactions between individuals, groups, and systems outside the group. Boundaries have some or all of these functions: they (1) define and give purpose; (2) give meaning and focus; (3) define beginnings and endings; (4) set limits; (5) differentiate what's inside from

what's outside, what is self from what is other; and (6) allow group members to hold each other accountable. Without boundaries, there is no order. Many boundaries are commonly maintained in organizations as Policies, Procedures, and Job Descriptions. When role boundaries are not clear and explicit, people may find themselves behaving in ways that don't meet the role expectation of others. When task boundaries are not clear, employees may find themselves confronted about not doing their own work or may find themselves doing someone else's work without realizing it, because it is unclear which tasks belong to which workers (Braxton, unpublished).

Healthy boundaries are both firm and permeable, which means that the boundary is clear and, at the same time, penetrable. In organizations where healthy boundaries exist, people and groups can have differences and find the means to negotiate across them. What is critical is the capacity to both see and acknowledge differences. Without acknowledgement, differences are often treated as barriers to connection and collaboration.

Unhealthy boundaries have two distinct qualities as well. They are either rigid (impenetrable) or flaccid (nonexistent). Whereas healthy boundaries are identifiable, resilient, and

flexible – able to withstand the give and take of diversity and conflict – unhealthy boundaries result in either the non-negotiable maintenance of the status quo

or a complete loss of limits. The characteristics of boundaries at either end of this spectrum are summarized in the following table:

Boundaries

HEALTHY		UNHEALTHY	
firm	permeable	rigid	flaccid
definitive	flexible	tight	no boundary
clear	malleable	closed	no limits
identifiable	give& take	non-negotiable	loss of self
	resilient		
	penetrable		

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Since boundaries define, delineate, clarify and distinguish between roles, they are the means by which an organization clarifies where things begin and end. They establish the parameters of accountability and responsibility. When boundaries are not clear or are constantly violated in an organization, the organization is no longer safe for its members; space and responsibility get to be defined by everyone and no one. Chaos and uncertainty accompany boundary breakdown, and growth or expansion are perilous unless this domain is addressed. Differences cannot be tolerated or worked until boundaries are managed (Gaffney, 2006).

Domain Three: Accountability

When systems are broken and emotionally provoked disturbances prevail, the most likely of the chief causes is a lack of accountability. Accountability is linked to adult development. Children are not instinctively accountable; they are dependent, which means that their sense of worth comes from their perceptions and awareness of others’ opinions of them and their value. Growing up requires taking responsibility for one’s behavior and choices. When systems are wounded or broken, and everyone looks for someone else to blame because the environment is not safe for risk taking, the system acts dependently and rewards dependent behavior. This is the antithesis of accountability. When the system fosters accountability, it creates opportunities for

people to learn from their mistakes and to acknowledge differences that become apparent in that process. The more employees perceive that the organization is open to different perspectives, the more willing they become to acknowledge and work through differences rather than to cast blame.

Accountability is, therefore, the means by which organizations can assure that their members get done what they agreed to do on behalf of the system, and that they take responsibility for their actions. Through accountability, the organization safeguards its credibility and integrity. Accountability is not concerned with right or wrong, but rather, with what and how; it is a powerful means for implementing vision and values.

Case #2: Accountability Domain: Building an Accountability Structure

In one nonprofit organization where boundaries were unclear and no accountability structure existed, the Executive Director became the de facto accountability system. This made him the *bad guy* in the system, blamed by everyone for being intrusive, demanding and fussy – as evidenced by his habit of reading a manager’s written product and routinely sending it back, heavily marked in red, with alternate wording and corrected grammar. The Executive

Director recognized that something had to shift if he was going to be successful in building an executive management team that could hold its own accountability and he retained an organization development consultation team. The team engaged the following strategies to bring the Executive Director and the executive managers into a collaborative relationship for the purposes of redistributing accountability:

- 1) The management team reviewed its work and the mission and vision of the organization.
- 2) Each manager considered and completed the following statements:
 - a) In order to do the work of the executive management team, I need to know these things from the other team members: _____.
 - b) In order to be more effective in terms of my role and tasks, I need the other team members to _____; I also need to provide my peers with _____.
 - c) The major challenges facing the organization, and which this team needs to address, are _____.

These completed responses and the ensuing discussion framed a shared understanding of each team member’s authorization to do work and became the basis for an

- accountability structure that clarified what was expected from peers, subordinates and authority figures.
- 3) The executive managers set up working agreements/contracts informed by the statement – *Accountability of task and function is more important than hierarchy* - to guide their work as managers.
 - 4) The group began to build an emerging accountability system by creating structures for:
 - a) Regular meetings to move information and support the mutual understanding essential to accountability. The group owned that information alone was insufficient; understanding was required to clarify what was needed, required and expected,
 - b) A continued emphasis on clarification of agreed-upon roles and responsibilities within the team.
 - c) Acknowledging, discussing and working through differences when they occur (e.g., debrief meetings or events where something did not work or went wrong, for the purpose of learning and self-correcting). This was an important element of the process, as unexamined differences can go *underground*, becoming personal and covertly undermining action on behalf of the task when they are not addressed.
 - 5) An outcome of the group's work was an understanding of how their work related to and aligned with the organization's mission and vision, which translated to a understanding of how that dynamic could operate across the organizational system. Two techniques supported this work:
 - a) Establishing clear boundary expectations, continually clarifying and self-correcting as required by changing conditions.
 - b) Strengthening the cycle of: communicate → clarify → be responsible (accountable).
- Ultimately, effective accountability structures must be treated as works in progress, that require continuous clarification, translation, monitoring and updating so that everyone – at the individual and system level – takes ownership and responsibility.

Domain Four: Communication Structures

“Crisis-driven organizations sacrifice communication networks, feedback loops, participatory decision making and complex problem solving under pressures

of chronic stress and, in so doing, lose healthy democratic processes and shift to top down control structures that discourage creativity” (Bloom, unpublished). Effective communication requires openness, space where individuals feel it is safe to tell their truth, accountability, using feedback in a productive way, making information available to all as a basis for decision-making and involving people in decisions that affect them. In organizations that have expanded beyond a small, traditionally homogenous nucleus, management must embed structures that assure the movement of input and information up, down and across the organization.

In the case study cited above, the executive management team came to understand their own role, individually and collectively, in fostering a healthy organization by fostering effective communications channels; in terms of the work of managers, this looked like:

a) Communicating and translating the organization’s vision, goals, purposes and functions up and down the system;

b) Creating structures to support cross-organizational communication and problem solving to eliminate the ground on which fiefdoms could emerge;

c) Practicing and modeling principles of participatory decision making

by involving staff in decisions that affect their work.

d) Being more transparent by making information available so that uncomfortable facts and divergent views could be factored into strategic discussions.

Domain Five: Hierarchical Power

One of the key strategies for keeping a system under control is hierarchical power. Hierarchical structures are typical of military regimes, monarchies and religious orders and are often mirrored in smaller organizations, as well, where those in command of the system wield tremendous power and influence. Those within the power structure often operate according to their own rules and consider themselves above the law in their private conduct. As a consequence, little value is placed on facts, truth or input from people at lower ends of the hierarchy. Power is tightly held in the authority structure; a breakdown occurs when differences emerge because the hierarchy often fails to recognize or value equity, and retains control over resources and processes for resolving problems.

When hierarchy is used to stifle, cover up, control and prevent truthful exploration of real issues and dialogue to solve problems, the organization feels unsafe and people fall back into self- or

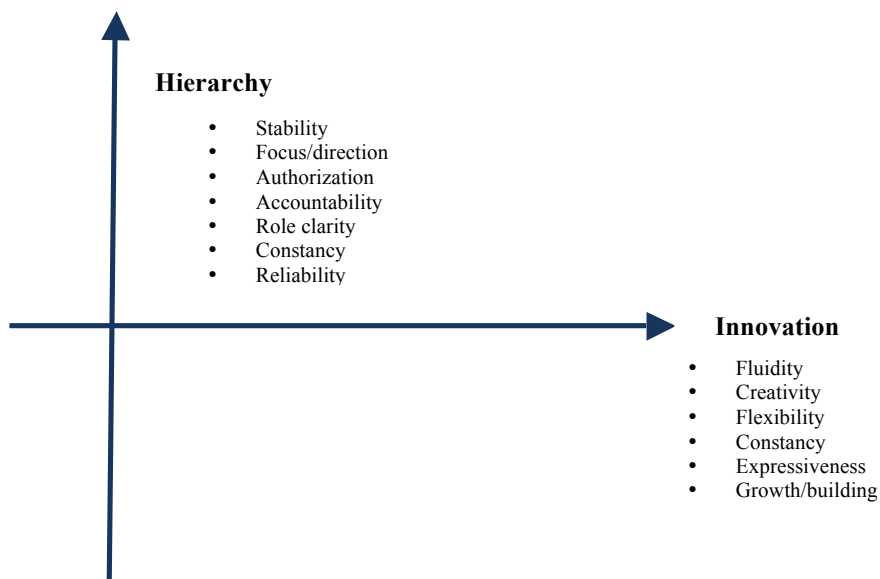
group-created zones of safety to protect themselves. By contrast, when those in command are not threatened by differences, the hierarchical structure can be used constructively to facilitate dialogue, pursue the truth, and create equitable solutions.

Hierarchical systems can be fair and effective if power is distributed across the system. The constructive use of hierarchy requires tapping its strengths, pushing decision making down the structure and counterbalancing role authority with creativity, expansiveness and transparency. Diagram 1. (below) illustrates this balance. Hierarchy, represented by the vertical line, provides stability, authorization, accountability, role clarity, constancy, focus, direction and reliability. Left unbalanced, however,

hierarchy breeds authoritarianism and dependency. Authority that cannot partner becomes an overbearing, controlling force.

The horizontal line – innovation – represents the balancing force. The energy of innovation takes the form of flexibility, creativity, fluidity, constancy and building. Where the authority axis intersects with the organization's creative energy, authority takes the form of steadiness and focus. Here, authority is firm, yet fluid; constant yet dynamic. At this, the cutting edge, organizations are most capable of meeting new challenges and change.

**Hierarchy and Innovation
(Diagram 1)**



Domain Six: Role and Task Clarity

When the organization does not have a clear and well-bounded infrastructure, roles and tasks of supervisors and staff become obscure. Productivity is compromised because individuals are unclear about expected outcomes and how they are to produce those outcomes. Often, in these systems, the organization's resources are poorly aligned with the expected outcomes. Role clarity requires that management articulate roles and tasks in terms that are meaningful to work that is to be performed and continuously review the fit of expectations, resource allocation and role/task delineation. Task and role ambivalence is a warning sign and it shows up during periods of change or expansion and growth.

The following diagram (see Diagram 2. below) of a therapeutic treatment system illustrates how task and role clarity support structural design clarity. The solid lines indicate hierarchical accountability and authorization; the dotted lines show the interdependent relationships of information flow, responsibility, communication and collaboration. In order for the system to work effectively each subsystem, and the roles within it, engage and/or are influenced by every other subsystem. For example, the

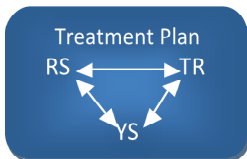
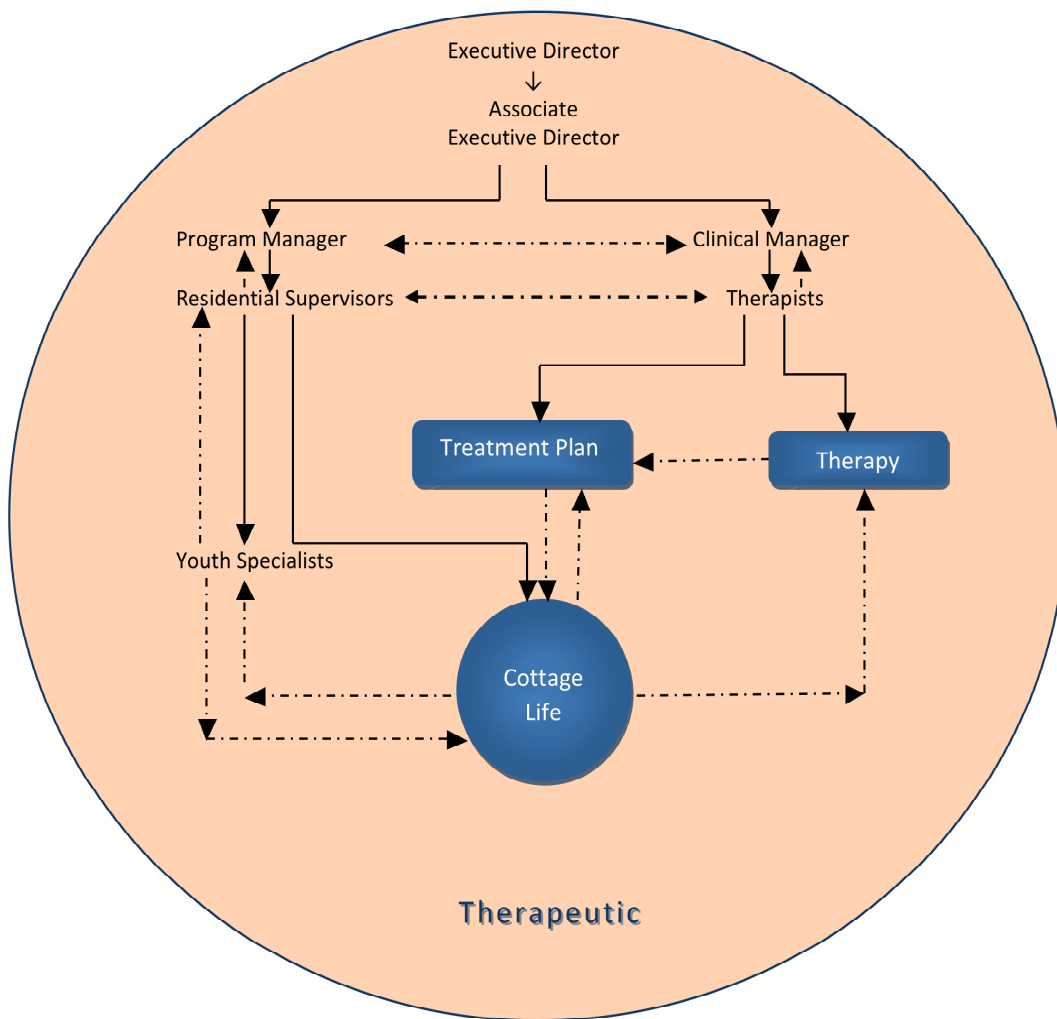
treatment planning system works because the therapists engage and work with the youth specialists and residential supervisors who staff and oversee the cottages. A breakdown in the treatment planning process affects cottage life, which affects cottage staff, who report under residential supervisors that have key roles in both communications and accountability channels up and down the hierarchical ladder. Each sector of the diagram has an impact on every other sector. There is responsibility for information flow at every juncture in the system, yet the hierarchy contains responsibility overall. For example, the program and clinical managers have no hierarchical relationship but they are jointly accountable for communication, information and collaboration, which affect their hierarchical management responsibilities upward and downward.

The diagram enables the system to reflect on multiple dimensions of role/task clarity and accountability. Visual representations, such as this model, showing the interactions of differential power relationships, accountability and information flow are useful tools for designing, monitoring or changing a system because they serve to minimize role/task ambivalence and subsequent

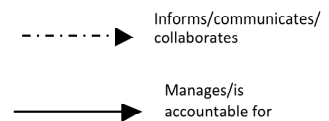
productivity loss. Although this is a diagram of an agency's clinical treatment system, every organization that relies on collaboration and information sharing outside of exclusively hierarchical relationships needs to be able to visualize – for both planning and problem solving –

how information and shared authority works to support achievement of the organization's aims.

Illustration of Movement of Information and Accountability



STRUCTURE MODEL
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Intervention Processes

The following four cases will discuss the role of leadership within the six domains framework. Leadership will be examined as both a power that can collude with the forces that undermine the system's integrity, and as a force that can direct the resources required to spearhead system change and healing.

Management under Fire

The Bell Weather organization was a unionized system with a long history of contentious relationships between management and the local union representatives. Many of the managers who had come up through the union ranks themselves were conflicted and unsure about how to hold accountable individuals who were in positions similar to those they once occupied. As a result, roles at the border between management and non-management staff were at best fragile and, at worst, management roles would disappear altogether. Much of the confusion and resulting tension could be attributed to managers' uncertainty about what was expected of them and the organization's history of setting up wars where there were winners and losers. Kurt Lewin describes the dilemma of managing in a union environment in these terms:

- a. Unions are democratic, hierarchical and political organizations.
- b. When politics trumps democracy, the organization is in jeopardy of becoming corrupt.
- c. Our distorted model of democracy is competition, as opposed to participation.
- d. Unions face a paradox. Historically, they had to fight and win in order to be taken seriously. In today's increasingly complex and global environment, win-lose strategies are insufficient. Unions must know more than how to stage a struggle and fight. They must also be able to think and see the bigger picture. If a preoccupation with power imbalances democracy, fighting and politics will prevail over reason and reflection, making cooperation and a win-win stance difficult or even impossible (Lewin, 2008).

The management of Bell Weather faced this very paradox. Moreover, managers had little or no training for their roles, as, historically, management recruitment leaned toward internal candidates and there

were few human resource mechanisms to support them in their transition. The Executive Director retained a consultant to present on the topic of “managing in a union environment” at a management retreat. The retreat made it clear that deeper work was indicated and the consultant, reporting to the Executive Director, began a multi-year organization development initiative. At the start of the intervention, managers had only recently begun meeting on a monthly basis as a group. There were often between 20-25 people in the room and the Executive Director ran the meeting, with various people giving input about the topics they should consider. Managers showed little enthusiasm or engagement around taking responsibility for their collective work, which was mirrored in their lack of interest in the meeting process. To engage the group, the consultant’s strategy was to focus on translating the evident, but unacknowledged pain in the group and giving language and meaning to its shared experiences. This breakthrough exercise launched a healing process that had to occur before the group members could engage with each other around substantive business matters.

The group started their healing journey by developing a list of the covert—or under-the-table—issues that affected whether and how work got done. The list was poignant and compelling because, for the first time, there was a public and collective effort to give voice to the issues that were undermining their own work.

Managers’ List of Themes That Subvert Work Within Their Organization:

1. Lack of a safe environment
2. A serious lack of trust throughout the organization
3. Inappropriate use of power
4. Staff and management held to different standards
5. Men have more power than women
6. Information is not shared freely within the management group
7. Lack of consistent accountability structures
8. No direction
9. Belief that all managers are bad
10. Fear to manage and/or discipline staff

11. Lack of clear expectations

12. Poor morale

While the stories behind these themes are very powerful, they are not unique. These themes weave a path across many wounded and broken systems. Bell Weather was a system at war with itself. It did not feel like a safe place; its win-lose mentality and history of emotional violence left people leery of opening up to each other. Relationships were confined to one's management area and managers operated in fiefdoms that did little or no collaborating. The ongoing battle between management and the union system created an atmosphere of distrust and blame. The fundamental issue, however, was that the management group was in pain – they felt wounded by the organizational system – and until that could be acknowledged, there was little or no agreement about how to move forward as a group. Symptoms of the dysfunction included: tenuous or porous boundaries; accountability was a vague term, not something that applied to management behavior; and, across the ranks of the entire system, individuals did not feel safe. Moreover, management's pain was mirrored and reinforced by the pain of the wounded and angry union group, whose behavior reflected distrust and disempowerment and a pattern of

win/lose, fight/flight responses during negotiations.

To support the healing process, the consultant's task was to create a holding environment – an environment safe enough for managers to talk to each other and to begin to work on their problems together. Management meetings became experiential learning and active problem solving sessions. The Executive Director stepped back and authorized the consultant to work both with him and his senior managers to re-educate the group in collaborative leadership strategies. As a result, the senior managers began to take responsibility for planning management meetings. In a major shift, they actively participated in creating their management meeting agendas and rotated responsibility for organizing the sessions. As group cohesion and functional capacity grew, senior management had to look at their role relationships with each other and with their Executive Director. Redistribution of power, establishment of accountability, and role and task clarity – breaking up the pattern of hierarchical power – had to occur at the top of the hierarchy before it could be applied at the levels below. The problem of how the union was behaving could not be explored until management could look at its own behavior. In the next phase, the

emphasis shifted to training the next level of managers in a similar process.

In the absence of a systematic management development process, managers' ability to take up their expertise and leadership role in the system never develops, nor does their ability to be personally present/empathic to their subordinates, to balance delegation and system building, to lead collaboratively, and to teach others. The work at Bell Weather focused, therefore, on building a cohesive, competent senior management group that practiced its learning by empowering subordinates to make more decisions, accept more responsibility, be more accountable and transfer the collaborative leadership model to the relationships between managers and, eventually, to the various union groups. The strategy in such interventions is to begin working through the six domains at the top of the leadership chain and then use those standards as the framework for meeting, influencing and holding all constituents to a higher standard of behavior. Bell Weather's future depends on whether both management and the union system can find a way to co-create an empowering structure that builds an interdependent, win-win process for the larger organization. The challenge of building a systemic change process in the direction of establishing and sustaining

social justice principles requires transforming the organizational culture by rebuilding infrastructures and communication systems and, above, all, training managers at all levels to lead, manage and be accountable.

Philip R.

Philip R. had been a hospital executive in two major cities in the southwest. In both systems he had problems with sexually acting out, creating situations that followed him to the next site. In two transitions, women followed him and in one case there was a child involved. There was some controversy at the second organization and in his third administrative appointment, this time at a metropolitan hospital in the Northeast, he accepted a lesser role as head of a hospital support services department. Soon after he arrived, the CEO was removed for political reasons and Philip was given the job. A board member, who would later claim that he had done his homework, inserted a morals clause as a contingency on the severance package included in Philip's new contract.

Philip's style of leadership was both charismatic and controlling. He had his hand in everything. The hospital was in chronic financial difficulty. In large part this was due to the region's practice of under-funding the budget and structural

prohibitions against borrowing, which might have funded repairs of the aging physical plant. As a publicly supported entity, the hospital was subject to the politics of the region's political leaders, who could weigh in on budget levels and thus exercise considerable influence over its future. In such a political system, favors are traded; for example, troublesome but well-connected staff could be moved out of high profile positions and sheltered within the complex hospital system.

The hospital was one of the few high profile settings in the region where culture, ethnicity and economic status did not matter. During its more than one hundred year history, it had established a valued reputation within the African American community as the place where people could be served without restrictions or prejudice. Many of the region's business leaders were born at the institution, and indeed regarded it as the only place African Americans of their generation could be served. It had also gained a reputation for its trauma service; it was commonly known, for example, that if someone you knew got shot, this hospital was the place to take them. As with most wounded systems, external and internal systems mirrored each other. The wounded and broken spirits that found their way here from the community

matched the culture of the hospital's internal community. And the wounded culture started with the Executive himself.

Philip re-created his sexual history in the new setting by surrounding himself with a number of attractive women who reported directly or indirectly to him and who maintained various sexual liaisons with him after working hours. In many regards, the organization's informal system was equally if not more influential than the formal. People with poor boundary management issues were in key roles throughout the system, creating an incestuous dynamic at every level. When the chief authority figure has highly fluid boundaries, there is no safety except that which he sanctions. At the hospital, membership of the executive team rotated periodically, as women moved in and out of the chief executive's favor and inner circle.

The literature on incest in family systems provides a framework for examining the boundary issues in this system. According to Courtois (1988), the incestuous family has these characteristics, which are paralleled in the incestuous organization:

- a) Chaotic systems
- b) Rigid boundaries regarding outsiders
- c) Physically isolated

- d) Lacking appropriate boundaries between individuals and generations (between peers and between authorities and subordinates)
- e) Enmeshment (cannot locate boundaries that differentiate yet mutually dependent on each other to get needs met)
- f) Role confusion
- g) Alcohol and drug abuse
- h) Instability of intimate (intra-group) relationships
- i) Broken parental (authority) system
- j) Secrets and collective denial
- k) Unpredictability
- l) Shame and blame

With Philip's widespread, yet ostensibly covert, pattern of having sexual relationships with his direct reports and their subordinates, there was no safe place in the system. The secrets spilled out of the executive suite; everyone knew them but could not talk about them with each other or anyone outside the organization without jeopardizing their own relationship and collusion with the boss. Phillip was a benevolent, seductive caretaker who, in both securing and

holding his position, created enemies and allies alike.

The trauma of the external environment—which was ravaged by extreme poverty, violence, and addiction, and imported into the hospital for treatment – was mirrored by the trauma of the internal system, where problem employees were dispatched and a fragile alliance secured the secrets of the sexual acting out of the management system. The management staff had anger management problems, co-dependency issues and alcohol problems, all being contained in a contentious environment.

The hospital's economic failure finally served as catalyst to its closure. As its first action, a new Board of Directors fired the Executive; senior staff was let go or reorganized to oversee a closure operation, and the boundaries of their relationship with Philip R. played a role in whether or how they maintained their positions. The closure served as shroud for the multi-faceted woundedness that officials could not address.

The case of Philip R. is not just an example of poor boundary management on the part of a leader. It is the case of an organization that has lost track of its real task and role. This interferes with the organization's ability to access its moral

compass. Social justice principles get lost in that same rabbit hole. If the informal system is the force driving the behavior of those with the most authority and power, then the organization is more than likely failing at the performance of its primary task – the task that must be performed to justify the organization’s existence (Miller & Rice, 1975). Medical service had been compromised because survival had become more important than stabilization or patient care. The loss of group identity and a crisis orientation was also buried in the infrastructure so political expedience, and not task clarity, was driving decisions (Braxton, 1996).

It can never be safe enough to raise real issues when an incestuous dynamic is at work and the informal system overtakes the formal system in influence and power. When everyone hears the rumors, knows the secrets and remains silent due to the tyranny of the informal system, collective denial protects and fosters corruption. Any dialogue about it happens only as water cooler gossip with no substantiating data. Where can individuals take their concerns, in the absence of boundaries?

When the presiding authority figure becomes an intrusive factor, crossing personal and intimate boundaries within and outside of the work setting, a crucial

organizational boundary has been lost – namely, the work boundary delineating where accountability begins and ends for behavior as an employee of the organization. When the boundary between the person and work is blurred at the top, it is difficult to clarify what people can be held accountable for, and what messages are being sent to employees. Management is then seen as inconsistent, which further compromises its integrity and effectiveness. Philip R. plays out Yalom’s point concerning leaders who cannot be confronted with their limitations when they are overbearing and formidable, or weak and distant. Philip’s management team and the system beneath it never became cohesive (Yalom, 1970). He hid himself in the protection of the hierarchical system, which shielded his dysfunctional behavior and perpetuated inequities in the system.

The LaBoykin System

LaBoykin, a residential child/adolescent treatment agency in the Midwest, was connected to a religious denomination that developed a strong endowment over its history. Located in the suburbs of a major metropolitan area, the demographic makeup of its resident population began shifting with white flight from the urban area it served. In the 1980s, the agency’s Board of Directors

hired a new Executive Director, who promptly took the reins with a rigid and controlling style. He chose as his right hand a Chief Financial Officer who would also serve as operational confidante, and the two of them proceeded to clamp down and run the organization in a very controlling stance that spread a pall over the agency. The grounds became a priority for the duo and were meticulously well kept, belying the growing fragmentation and eventual erosion of the treatment system. There was little or no investment in the staff's training and the quality of the service system began to deteriorate. By all indications, the grounds got more attention than the client service system.

After a twenty-year tenure, the Executive retired. His successor had first-hand knowledge of the organization's troubles and launched his tenure with a broad exploration and data gathering initiative. The process began to peel back layers of cover, exposing a shattered and wounded system. By then over 70% of the treatment population and almost all of the direct treatment staff in the residential program were African Americans. The supervisory level was, however, predominantly Caucasian.

When interviewed, the staff reported feeling psychologically and emotionally unsafe, as they focused on

survival and kept their heads down in order to keep their jobs. They were rarely challenged to grow professionally or to improve the treatment system, as there was no emphasis on outcomes. Job descriptions were vague or non-existent, and communication for the purpose of improving the work was discouraged. The Human Resources Director was harassed and constantly subjected to psychological abuse from the Finance Director, who was her boss. Staff was not held accountable; for example, the Director of Development raised little money but was never asked to account for his time. No one dared to challenge or question anything for fear of reprisals from the top. Agency salaries, considered some of the best in the state, ensured low turnover levels that might otherwise have drawn more attention from regulators or the Board. When leadership cannot insure safety, the trust level goes down and staff will resist change for fear of reprisals. Growth cannot occur under these conditions, so progress stalls. Staff distrusted each other at every level of the LaBoykin system, and alliances, cliques and special relationships defined the infrastructure. Trust had broken down across the system, and a union—formed to protect staff from abusive authority—served as its most cohesive element.

The pattern established at the top of the organization replayed itself at each

level of the system. Residents—the clients of the system—were at the bottom of the chain and suffered their own injustices, with no appeal. Staff felt isolated and disempowered and, since all power in such systems is projected on the authority figures that control resources and thus rewards, they would not risk revealing what they knew about the dysfunctional covert system. Secrets sustained and protected the wounded infrastructure. Within the system were concerns centered around race and class that could not be discussed openly, even when client safety was an issue. After the former Executive's departure, the new Executive made a conscious effort to create a safe holding environment so the staff might risk exposure without fearing retaliation. The stories that surfaced as the system began to yield to the change process revealed an informal structure that protected the staff more than the residents.

Wounded staff in a dysfunctional system often feel and behave like victims: they want to be free to exercise adult choice making, and they also want to be told what to do to avoid responsibility. Where people in disenfranchised roles have systematically experienced abuse by those in power, they are often reluctant to take risks for fear of further exposure and humiliation. At LaBoykin, boundaries were

never consistent, fair or equitable. Rules were arbitrarily applied in an atmosphere of secrecy and survival.

In the early phases of system change, one of leadership's primary responsibilities is to create the space for healing to occur and trust to be rebuilt. Without trust, people will not feel safe and that which must be surfaced—those elements at the core of the organization's dysfunction—will remain underground.

The LaBoykin system will be in recovery for a few years. It must break through the dependency dynamics built up over many years of unhealthy boundaries, the survival culture propped up by high pay rates, low accountability structures and a potentially adversarial union environment. Challenges for the new leadership include winning the trust of the core staff, building new alliances and collaborative structures across the agency, and rebuilding channels of participatory communication. Across the system, there is both a need and desire to be involved, and anxiety about being abandoned again. Essentially, this agency is trying to grow up. That task will be made easier as the leadership continues to demonstrate its integrity, its capacity to hold the high ground, its refusal to play favorites, and its willingness to own the consequences of cleaning its organizational house. As management

norms change, employees must learn to shake off the lethargy and depressive dynamics of the past. They must learn new skills, how to work accountably, and how to build and sustain collaborative relationships with each other, with the administration and, above all, with the children and families they serve.

Mary Jo B.

Mary Jo B. was a white senior manager in a largely black urban municipal organization. She got along well with most of her colleagues and was known to be fair and very supportive of her direct reports, most of whom were African Americans in mid-level management positions. Phyllis, an African American woman, came from another part of the agency to work for Mary Jo. While enthusiastic initially, Phyllis developed a pattern of avoiding technical work that was clearly a requirement of her job. Mary Jo was often out of the office and did much of her work in the evening, after Phyllis had gone home. Mary Jo knew she needed to confront Phyllis directly about work that was sliding, but there never seemed to be time. Eventually, she went to the Human Resources office for consultation and, when the evidence was reviewed, was told to initiate a performance management plan with Phyllis. After the first meeting, Phyllis

realized Mary Jo was serious and she became angry. Their previously harmonious relationship became fractured and contentious. Phyllis insisted that Mary Jo document all communications with her and the Human Resources officer with whom Phyllis consulted agreed that was reasonable. The conversations, the documentation and the acrimony persisted for several more weeks, until Mary Jo overheard whispers at the copy machine and realized that the situation had escalated.

Phyllis had filed an EEO suit against Mary Jo, claiming that she was discriminating against Phyllis as a minority and a mother. (Mary Jo was childless.) Once the grievance was filed, communications concerning it were taken out of Mary's Jo's hands by her supervisor, who conducted all meetings with Human Resources personnel about how the action would proceed. No one met with Mary Jo until she demanded information about what was transpiring. No one in Human Resources acknowledged or addressed the fact that the issue was initially about whether Phyllis' skill sets were sufficient for the role, or that Human Resources had consulted with Mary Jo, advised that a performance management plan be effectuated and approved the plan that Mary Jo developed. The issue went from

competence to color as soon as the discrimination claim was filed. Phyllis was allowed to transfer to another department, taking her budgeted slot with her, and Mary Jo lost a critical position within her division.

Had this system placed a priority on accountability, it might have resolved the competency question first, based on facts and evidence, and then addressed the merits of the discrimination case. A system that defaults to blame instead of accountability is headed for trouble. When accountability structures do not exist, or are not utilized to recognize and allow the exploration of differences, fear-based emotions dictate outcomes and justice is skewed. When managers subsequently understand that the organization will not support them in carrying out policies, they learn to look the other way. In such organizations, politics replaces social justice.

This case illustrates a disconnect that is often overlooked in the field of social justice and diversity. Certainly, one action that violates members of either the dominant or minority group is the failure to fairly and consistently apply a reasonable standard of job performance that clarifies task, role expectation and performance competency. However, equity as a standard should also include equal opportunity to learn requisite skills for

one's role, and shared accountability for learning and applying those skills. To be truly fair, the inquiry into rights violations must start with whether a clear standard ever existed, along with an inquiry into the responsibility and accountability for all involved in meeting that standard. We must learn to distinguish structure, accountability and performance issues from personal issues.

Mary Jo B. was asked to shoulder a burden that belonged to the organization, and which was then abandoned in the rush toward blame. If the organization fails to exercise its responsibilities, as happened here, managers will learn to work around the system in order to get things done. Managers are forced to make personal decisions when organizational policies are not clear and communication structures are vague. Management did not support Mary Jo in the exercise of her own managerial responsibilities. She will probably conclude that the formal system has no enforceable standards, and respond with her own tactics for survival.

Conclusion

This article explores six organizational domains that influence and sustain institutional balance and self-regulation. When organizations and the people within them fail to meet their

respective needs, some sort of crisis usually occurs. In the author's experience each of the six domains, when properly addressed by an organization's leadership, is key to rectifying the imbalance. It is critical to appreciate the challenge, in today's fast-paced world, of taking the time to look at and reflect on the six domains; of creating a new understanding of what is out of balance; and of focusing attention on reparative and self-correcting processes.

Social justice cannot exist where systemic wounding is the norm. The cases examined herein illustrate ten critical lessons for leadership:

1. The role of leadership is crucial in raising awareness of the problems that must be addressed to create the conditions for social justice in the organization. It is at the leadership level that an environment of openness and transparency can begin the transformative process, and make it safe enough for people to risk breaking old, unhealthy norms.
2. Leadership needs to be seen as neither intrusive nor abandoning, encouraging people to reveal the real issues buried in the system.
3. Leaders must define and manage boundaries, thereby setting the bar. Those with less authority and power have much more to lose by stepping out of the norm.
4. Leaders must create safe space for people to reflect on their experience and build feedback loops so information that is generated in the system can be accessed and fed back where it adds value.
5. Structures that enable people to talk to each other about work issues, without fear of reprisal, must be established; they are essential in troubled work places. Boundaries for communication must be established and maintained so civility and collegiality become the organization's norms.
6. Leaders must know their roles and stay in them. A leader's role is his/her most important tool and resource in avoiding the pull of personal agendas that undermine social justice concerns. The first question should always be, "What is the work we came to do, and how does my behavior and the behavior of others contribute – or not – to that work?"
7. When the task gets lost – and it will – leaders must continually retrieve it; assessing its validity and value as the work progresses,

- assuring people are accountable for holding their role in achieving the desired outcome.
8. Leaders must authorize and empower people to do their jobs with integrity, and to stay focused on the work of the organization. Being warm, friendly and personable is not the same as *getting personal*; the latter is a boundary issue and must be guarded against particularly in the wounded system.
 9. Leaders must involve staff across the system in setting organizational priorities.
 10. When management is inconsistent, loses boundaries, cannot be counted on, hides in hierarchy and cannot find or hold its role and task, the organization will be in crisis.

Leaders must be visionary in a pragmatic way, seeing where the system has been, where it is currently, and where it needs to go. To see typically submerged patterns, leaders must hold all three dimensions – past, present, future – simultaneously. Even as they honor individual and system wounding that has occurred, they must move people beyond the story's grip. An effective leader holds both the panoramic view and the ground in which differences emerge through

dialogue that is consistently maintained and valued. If the differences are allowed to emerge as right-wrong or win-lose stances, the healing process will be slowed or stopped.

Finally, social justice in organizational life depends on robust and systemic structures that allow violations and abuses to be aired and rectified. Social justice values are integrally linked to fulfillment of vision and purpose at the organization level. There is no justice where there is no capacity to reign in its violation. The six domains described in this article offer a model for diagnosing organization dysfunction and employing the necessary tools to repair it.

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