

A Framework for Consulting to Organizational Role

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Abstract: Role is a key component in any organizational change and a critical place for such change to be initiated. This article discusses the concept of organizational role and its complexities. The article offers both a framework for thinking about organizational role and a process for consulting to organizational “role holders.”

“Role” has been part of the organizational discourse for as long as people have been thinking about organizations in scientific terms. As practitioners frequently are called upon by clients to think about organizational life and the continual process of change, we recognize that most organizational occurrences, whether a change in process, strategy, or structure or making sense of daily operating issues begin and end, from one perspective, in the roles of individuals and in the way that these “role holders” act and interact, consciously and unconsciously. This article begins to look at one method of doing so: to think about role and all it contains for the person and the organization. It is directed toward three interrelated purposes:

1. Helping “retrieve” the concept of role from its current state of disregard in organizational studies and consulting practice and reinforce its place in the body of organizational reality and functioning.
2. Depicting a framework for thinking about organizational role.
3. Describing a process for consulting to organizational role.

We invite readers to apply this thinking on role beyond the concepts presented here to the broader issue of the impact any change might have on role. It is ultimately the role (as much as the person in it) within an organization that many change efforts must be directed toward and that will yield the greatest impact.

Role

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There is a great deal of confusion when it comes to the use and meaning of the word *role*. The term has ranged in definition from the “acting“ one does in “role,” as if to “play a role” and not be real or true to oneself, to the description of what one does on paper (not necessarily in reality). In our experience role is highly complex and critical feature of any organization. The *American Heritage Dictionary* (1976) defines role as: (a) a character or part played by an actor in a dramatic performance; (b) the characteristic and expected social behavior of an individual; and (c) a function or position.

In organizations role could actually be defined as all of the preceding. One does 'act' the part one is expected to play or the role as “given.” Someone within an organization needs to be in the role of director and producer to authorize the part, define his or her expectations for the part, describe the way in which he or she wants the part to be played, pay for the part, and so on, giving the context and “organizational meaning” to the role being undertaken. One can also assume a role in a rather convincing way without truly *being* in role. Acting is an appropriate definition as well in that we often find it difficult to assume an organizational role because of the difficulty of negotiating between our feelings about our work role and what we are expected to achieve or produce.

Organizational role, though, is not just about *performing* in role. The second definition also applies to how one “takes” one's organizational role. Organizations have certain cultures, groups and subgroups that have stated and unstated behaviors that are considered appropriate and others that are not. In assuming an organizational role one needs to consider these behavioral aspects in order to fit in, get the work accomplished, manage day-to-day activities, and operate professionally and personally in an effective manner. One's behavior and personal style do not have to match or mirror that of the organization, but the two need to coexist; differences and similarities must be understood and negotiated. How a person in role *takes* these dynamic parts and incorporates them is critical to that person's performance, effectiveness, health, relatedness, and so on.

The third definition states the most familiar: a role as “a function or position” that has a set of parameters within which some set of tasks must be completed. This configuration, however, is usually not adequately defined in a job description. The subtleties and dependencies of each task make the reality of working within a function or position more complicated. The ability to function or be in a position is complicated by pressures within an organizational system, by ongoing negotiation between what one is given and what one takes for the role within which one is to be working.

The framework emerging from these definitions -- role as taken and given and representing part of a system of tasks -- does not yet fully address all that occurs in and with role. Role is very much defined and shaped by the individual in it and what the individual brings with her or him. While the organization's definition of a role may be identical for two people, how they work and their effectiveness will vary.

Role, then, can be thought of as the way in which one works in one's role and as including the following:

- a) Specifically assigned duties, activities, goals, and/or functions that are required for the pursuit of some common effort in a group, team, and/or organizational;
- b) Part, piece, or share in the overall mission and system of tasks present in an organization;
- c) Unconscious, assigned, and/or assumed function in the covert system of irrationalities or sentience attendant to the organization's overall mission and system of tasks; and
- d) How individuals understand, and then work with, his or her role as given and taken within the organization's systems of task and sentience.

In thinking about organizational role, we must consider the part that the organization expects them to play, the organizational cultures that shape behavior, the various relationships and interactions with others within the organization, and the actual function that is “needed” in the system. In addition, we must help role holders think about how and what they are contributing to the definition and performance of the role.

Organizational Role

Where the Individual and System Meet

The concept of role contributes powerfully to the intellectual machinery available for understanding organizational life and for appreciating the complex experience of endeavoring to contribute to productive enterprises. The concept of role enables us to see where the person and system meet. From this vantage point, we can think about the “person-in-context” and the interrelations between the two. It renders the impact of the organization on the individual visible, in terms of the experience of fulfilling a particular part, and it renders the impact of the individual on the larger organization visible in terms of how individuals “take up” their roles and, in turn, enact the set of systemic forces that are expressed through the role.

Since the concept of role creates a window into organizational life where the individual and system intersect, role allows us to think carefully about how the individual, at both conscious and unconscious levels, inter-links with the system and the demands and expectations for performance it imposes. Formal roles delegated to individual carry authority to work on certain tasks in certain ways, although there may be a discrepancy between the stated authority and what authority, in fact, accompanies a delegation. Symbolic meanings, informal tasks, covertly authorized work, etc., are also attached to roles and, in turn, affect the texture of collaboration, competence, and meaningful contribution.

Broadening the idea of role to include all of its elements enables us to appreciate the complexity

of the concept and the range of forces impinging on people at work. Take, for example, how frequently Human Resource Departments are criticized for the quality of the candidates they find and hire for the other departments in their organization. When Human Resource Departments are, however, covertly authorized to prevent lawsuits and subsequently act on that basis, it leads to the outcome for which they are criticized. How does the Vice President of Human Resources come to understand and respond to this dilemma? What data exists to discern both the stated purposes of human resource activities and the covert definitions and meanings attached to them?

This brief example says nothing about the other side of the equation: the subjective side of the individual's own experience of the multiple expectations and attributions given to a role. How the individual in the role makes sense of these formal and informal, spoken and unspoken components of the role produces another set of elements that, together, make up this complex constellation of factors that we refer to as "role."

The experience in role provides the data needed to make sense of the larger surrounding context and shapes the ways in which others approach and understand us. It also provides the explicit and tacit guideposts that assist us in our efforts to make meaningful contributions to the organization's system of tasks.

A Neglected Concept

Even though role is a basic building block of organizations, the concept has faded in popularity and is often neglected in contemporary approaches to thinking about and intervening in organizational life. Here we offer some thoughts and hypotheses about why the concept has become marginalized and little used in mainstream organizational thinking. In particular, we identify two related factors that have contributed to the fate of this concept.

First, "role" has been associated with bureaucracy and can connote something fixed and static. In recent years, the term *bureaucracy* has been used as an organizational "dirty word," often signifying a calcified, rigid, unresponsive, and deadening approach to structuring organizations that is failing in today's post-industrial world of complexity and change. The legacy of Weber (1947) and industrial-era organizations has left many with a view of bureaucracy as a fixed web of positions, organized rationally in hierarchical fashion and composed of roles that are filled impersonally by their occupants.

Today, however, we see other kinds of organizations emerging to replace those that look like the archetypal pyramid. Instead of structures that create fixed, invariant positions, structures are dramatically changing and becoming more flexible. Correspondingly, the positions held by individuals within these structures are subject to fluctuating pressures and ongoing adaptation to emergent conditions, and they are likely to be composed of changing "bundles" of tasks. The increasing predominance of knowledge-based work and the emphasis on local problem solving and initiative favor passionate connections to work, personal investment, and creativity instead of Weber's (1947) impersonal policy-governed bureaucrat.

Not only has the concept of role been stigmatized by its association with bureaucracy, but its association with a fixed position has raised doubts about the relevance of the concept in this world of turbulence and active adaptation. With chronic instability, rapid environmental change, and the emphasis on flexibility, nimbleness, and competitiveness, more attention has been directed toward process variables such as work flow, quality management, and concurrency. However, we argue that the association of role with a fixed position is an error. Viewing role systemically leads to a comfortable coexistence of the idea of role with continually evolving and adapting organizational settings.

Another concept sharing a similar fate is that of “boundary,” which focuses on transactions across relevant subdivisions, though, as with role, people often and erroneously associate boundary with fixed structures and rigid distinctions. The concept was quickly discredited and stigmatized as “bureaucratic” and “command and control authoritarian,” and it has been further devalued as promoters of new forms of work practice latched onto the idea of “the boundaryless organization” (Ashkenas, Ulrich, Jick, & Kerr, 1995) and other similar formulations that jettisoned rather than adapted the concept. This turn of events depleted the repertoire of useful concepts available to understand and intervene in organizational processes, since “boundary” is perhaps the most powerful conceptual tool at our disposal for discerning the impact of differences in role relations (i.e., authority, tasks, and subsystem relations; see Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1992, for an excellent overview of the persistent importance of recognizing and addressing issues of boundary in contemporary organizations). In the same vein, consigning “role” to the scrap heap of outmoded, bureaucracy tainted concepts depletes our ability to look at the complex interconnections between the person and the context of organizational life.

Second, the concept of role became hopelessly confused and loaded down with multiple meanings and connotations that, like all such ideas, it no longer clarified. When compelling and illuminating concepts become so laden with multiple meanings they often become, essentially, useless.³ The ideas of “paradigm,” or that of “strategic planning,” come to mind in this regard. As with social science in general, organizational studies follow a similar pattern with powerful emergent ideas, exacerbated by the commercial “fad-making” of the latest idea. It seems that we repeatedly see interesting and useful ideas arise, spawn new quasi-religions, and then sink under the weight of confused use and generalized application; “re-engineering” and “learning” are two recent examples of a long line of ideas that have lost their meaning by referring to nearly everything.

While “role” came and went before the commercialization of organizational concepts, a brief review of the history of the concept readily illustrates the enormous range of meaning that came to

³ One might even argue, following Bion's (1970) insights in *Container and Contained*, that a deeply held and anxiety-laden need to render powerful concepts that challenge or disturb habitual patterns of thought powerless can be found within an established order of understanding, and belief.

be associated with the word. A cursory review of the mainstream organizational and sociological literature devoted to questions of role reveals three major uses of the term: (a) structurally as the duties, tasks, responsibilities, and expectations associated with a particular position; (b) as the behaviors of individual members in response to the duties, tasks, responsibilities, and expectations associated with a particular position (“playing a role”); and (c) as an individual's internal conception or image of the part that he or she assumes in the enterprise.

The legacy of Weber and the rationalistic biases of organizational thinking that have since prevailed have emphasized the essential uniformity and coherence of these three orientations. Since organizations relate means to ends rationally and since people impersonally fulfill their role-determined duties and obligations, the person and the role fit seamlessly together in Weber's ideal organization.

Organizational life, however, is not so simple. In fact, a basic misfit exists between organizations and the people within them (e.g., Argyris, 1957). Furthermore, there are powerful forces shaping behavior in organizations that have little to do with rational task and purpose but arise from the irrational sources of meaning that exist in group norms (Merton, 1959; Newcomb, 1950), culture (Linton, 1945; Ott, 1989), and psychodynamics underpinning peoples' connection to their organization (Bion, 1970; Menzies, 1961).

Collective life is saturated by powerful emotional forces. Roles have conscious as well as unconscious components, they have informal as well as formal features, and they have symbolic meaning that shapes the attributions and projections through which others decode the meaning of an individual's behavior. There are always a range of discrepancies among official roles, the roles individuals are called upon to play, and the roles people actively assume. The role one “plays” exerts a powerful effect on one's sense of self; people “take up” and perform the tasks and duties associated with their roles in different ways, with often vastly different consequences. Role became such a rich repository for important aspects of work experience in organizations, taking on so many meanings in so many contexts, that it, like many other illuminating concepts, suffered from the accompanying diffuseness, lack of clarity, and diminished usefulness.

An Illustration

Rapid shifts of organizational life actually makes the idea of role far more important to making sense of the surrounding environment, can help us see best courses of action and understand the range of possibilities afforded at any given time. Take, for example, a relatively typical manufacturing plant that has undergone a major reorganization along socio-technical system principles. With the introduction of a team-based organization and the investment of teams with considerable decision-making authority, the former roles of engineers and machine operators underwent profound change. Whereas, before, the engineers directed operators to take certain actions, they now were expected to engage in collaborative, problem-solving interactions with teams of operators. Establishing clear team boundaries required looking carefully at task requirements and establishing role definitions that allowed for effective decision making and

integration of the production process. Furthermore, inherent tensions between the engineers and operators required a structure that could contain and help mediate the inevitable conflicts between the two groups, a requirement that, in turn, pressured the plant manager's role to change significantly.

This change required careful attention to the issue of role and its many facets: what was expected of engineers and operators, what covert expectations were being placed on engineers to produce outcomes that implied the kind of formal authority they formerly held, to what extent the operator role was invested with an unrealistic expectation to resolve issues that depended on involvement of people outside of the team, and so on.

The illustration highlights some of the many dilemmas that organizational change presents and how the idea of role can help sort and manage them. These dilemmas include (a) developing an appreciation and deeper understanding of the *new* roles, (b) examining gaps between organizational design and how people in various positions are actually being used, (c) discerning cross-currents between the formal and informal definitions of roles, and (d) being able to distinguish the mismatch between expected performance and the fantasized meaning of a role. All are dependent on one's ability to think about role as more than a simple bundle of tasks but as a concept that is a part of and includes the broader range of functions (formal, informal, conscious, unconscious, etc.) being fulfilled for the larger system at any given time.

A Systemic Framework for Organizational Role

Working with the idea of role to help people in organizations make sense of their experience requires a working definition of role as a starting point, especially since the term has become so laden with multiple meanings. As stated earlier, we see role as a particular functioning of the overall system of tasks that is assigned to (or given) and taken up by the individual and colored by the sentient system. From this perspective, role incorporates all of the various meanings and connotations that have collected around the term and integrates them in a dynamic, process-oriented framework. Understanding role, then, requires unpacking the various dimensions that constitute that role at any given moment and learning how to identify its features.

A framework for understanding the complexity that is both inherent and experienced in role is built around two critical distinctions. The first can be understood as the mechanisms for how work is authorized in organizations and the second as the way in which work tasks are derived and enacted. We have organized these distinctions as follows:

- Whether an aspect of role is given by the organization or taken by the individual and
- Whether the aspect under consideration arises from the “task” and/ or “sentient” system of

the organization.

How these role dimensions align with one another and intersect helps us make sense of the many patterns that emerge from the idea of role. This framework for thinking about role is useful when consulting to role, developing and designing a role, enacting a role, managing others in role, making sense of one's experience in role, and intervening to effect change at an organizational level.

Role as “Taken” and Role as “Given”

This framework takes shape where the two ways in which a role is authorized and experienced meet: role as taken and role as given. The role holder's internalized and then enacted view/construction of her or his role, how it is construed and interpreted subjectively, is the individual's role as taken. “Role influencers” -- those the role holder is working for and/or with -- define the individual's role as given. The given and taken aspects of role produce its authorization, whether through the formal process of an organization assigning and thus holding an individual responsible for specific outcomes or through the “self-authorizing” mechanisms of how individuals take up their responsibilities and get the work done. It is at this boundary between the organization's view of role and the internally derived enactment where role dilemmas occur.

Consider a hypothetical illustration of the routine practice of hiring a new employee and the way in which a human resource professional and the hiring manager might interact. The human resource professional's given role includes enforcing regulations, hiring and developing employees with required skills, or the fit of a new hire within a company's compensation and benefit policies. The way in which this person takes up her or his set of tasks can vary depending on the individual, the relationship to the hiring manager, the organization, the context, and so on. A “hands-on” role interpretation might have the human resource professional intimately involved in the recruiting and hiring process, possibly limiting a manager's ability to hire specific candidates. The human resource professional's taken role, in this case, might easily conflict with the hiring manager's taken role. If, however, the human resource professional's taken view of role is to be less involved or to offer a broader interpretation to the given set of hiring tasks, the responsibility for compliance might shift to the hiring manager and thus appear to give the manager more flexibility (and responsibility). People's understanding of both the taken and given aspects of their role and the negotiation (alignment) between them would be necessary for a productive hire and for the reduction or elimination of role conflict.

We rarely see organizations consider alignment between the taken and given aspects of role and the way in which these aspects affect role functioning and cause role dilemmas and organizational issues. When faced with the consequences of misalignment managers often assume that someone is resisting work, has some lack of skill or competency, or has another “agenda” or that a behavioral or attitudinal problem is the cause when in fact the sources of the dysfunction are systemic rather than personal.

Figure 1 expresses the relationship between “role as taken” and “role as given.” The shaded area represents the degree to which -- the role as given -- is in alignment with the individual's construction of the same role -- the role as taken. The amount of overlap is the degree to which the role is enacted as expected within the organization. It is important to note that one might also be taking up one's role as a result of some underlying dynamic within the system that remains unconscious, unstated, and essentially unknown to both role holders and role influencers. One's taken role, then, could be a result of an unexpressed and/or undefined systemic need. These aspects of role overlap and complicate the manner in which one engages in both the taken and given aspects of role.

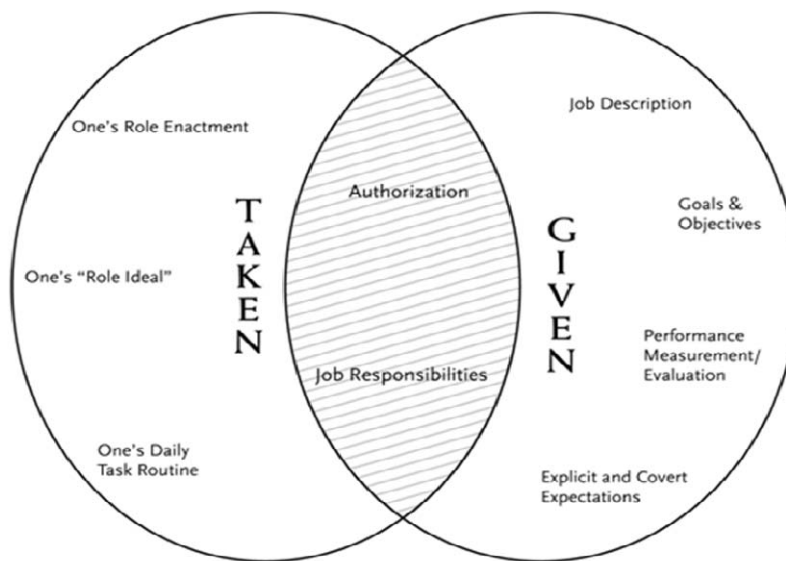


Figure 1

Task and Sentient System Aspects of Role

In addition to the way in which work roles are taken and given, how work is derived and motivated -- the expression of the “task and sentient systems” (Miller & Rice, 1967) within which role operates -- is a second crucial dimension. The distinction between task and sentient aspects of role is linked to one's responsibility (as taken and given) and authorization (given) and is a critical area within organizations.

The task system comprises the aspects of role that belong to the structures, procedures, and technologies, which exist independently of individuals within organizations. The system of tasks one consciously assumes is the more easily recognizable part of role since conscious expectations are built in, performance measurement occurs (the role as given), and the individual overtly works the role as taken (this may also be the role for which the organization recognizes an individual as “responsible”). The extent to which one is authorized in these tasks emerges in the formal space

between taken and given.

The sentient system is the social, human process within an organization: the symbols, meanings, unconscious group forces and/or emotional significance experienced and attitudes and beliefs based on the needs, fantasies, and patterns of identification within a role and an organization (Miller & Rice, 1967). The sentient aspect of role arises from the hopes and fears that govern individuals' expectations of how they will be treated by others and the beliefs and attitudes on which they base their code of conduct from their history of relationships with others, including how others respond to their group identification (e.g., gender, ethnicity, education, and professional identity; see Walker, 1992). A common “role window” into sentient functioning is where one assumes responsibility that has not been established or where the responsibility may lie elsewhere but the role holder assumes it. The seemingly arbitrary and sometimes disruptive dynamics of the sentient system are where unproductive aspects of organizational politics and dynamics occur. And it is also a place where a great deal of learning can be gained about the effectiveness of an organization's structure, the efficiency of its processes, and the capacity of any individual and group involved.

Figure 2 depicts task and sentient systems. The shaded area denotes the boundary between the formal and informal expressions of work within an organization. It is here that organizational development most readily resides, including the dynamic process of teams, organizational change management, resistance to change, and other systemic views of how work tasks are negotiated with the organization's unconscious and less visible parts.



Figure 2

In the example of the manufacturing plant where the engineer and operator roles were significantly shifting, the sentient system operating within this organization could easily overwhelm and disrupt the plant's output. Take, for example, a particular engineer who meets with a team of operators and begins telling them what to do, “instructing” them in their set of tasks as she might have under her prior role definition. Some of the operators react with anger, perhaps disrupting the flow of work.

A split occurs in the team in which some operators resist participating and are labeled as unable to change or even reprimanded for “poor behavior.”

These operators have a different experience: their behavior is directly related to the experience of their authority being curtailed. The given and taken aspects of role, as experienced, are significantly different from their expectation. One can easily imagine this resulting in typical symptoms of “role misalignment” or “role conflict:” increased lateness, illness, or even accidents. The engineer in this case might be doing exactly what she believed to be her role. The difference between the operators' understanding and expectation of their new role and that of the engineer has caused dramatic operating issues. Productivity in role is linked to how well a role's system of tasks is understood across both the given and taken realms and the ability of the organization to express and understand its underlying sentient system.

The resulting framework for understanding organizational role is expressed in Figure 3.

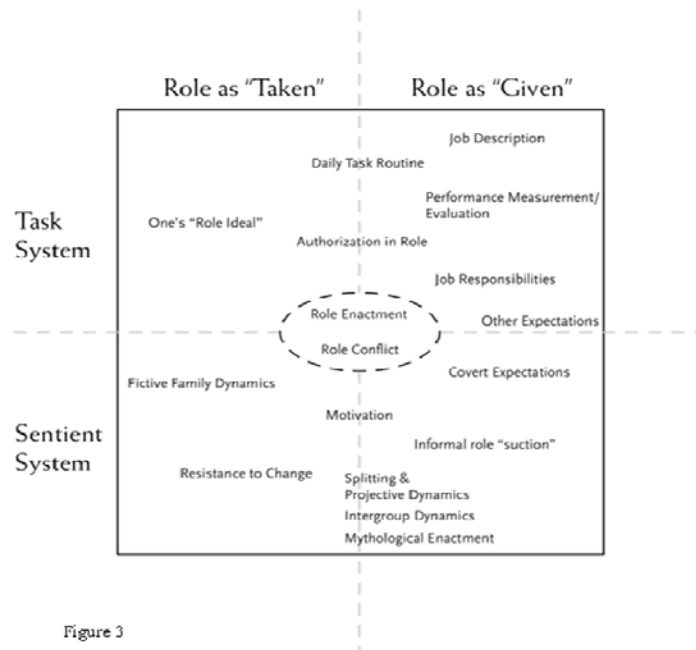


Figure 3

One can begin to locate different role occurrences in different quadrants of the framework. For instance, one's authorization is both part of the role as given by the organization (as in the ability to approve large expenditures, hire and fire) and partially contained in how one authorizes. A conflict between two role holders, for example, can be about the sentient system in that they may be fighting over unresolved emotional or inter-group issues between two departments or participating in the end-product of envy and competition. Role conflict, though, can also be the result of a lack of clarity about the given tasks or can represent the differences in the two individuals' perception of their role.

This framework provides for an understanding that forms the foundation for the method we are developing for consulting to organizational role in which we work to first clarify and then align these internally and externally derived aspects of role.

Application: Organizational Role Consultation

In followingt sections we briefly describe an intervention technology, organizational role consultation (ORC), that is centered on the concept of role and provides managers (and other role holders) a window into the many facets of role, as well as a way to think about how they can take up their roles-and exercise the authority vested in them-in a more productive manner. Key to this intervention methodology is how, in consulting to the organizational role holder, we help individuals distinguish between their person as “self” and their person “in role” and assist them in seeing and working with all that is contained at the many intersections (boundaries).

Understanding role is ever more elusive considering today's complicated and dynamic conditions which eliminate the familiar guideposts, indicators, and repetitive patterns of experience that were present when organizational life was more stable. The assumption used in ORC is that an individual's contribution and effectiveness in an organization can be understood only as a function of how well the individual and the organization negotiate the boundary between the role as given (which constitutes the organization's expectations) and the role as taken (how one's role is taken up and internally held). This negotiation or *alignment* is further complicated by the task and sentient systems operating within the organization.

ORC is the active process of aligning the role as taken and the role as given within both the organization's task and sentient systems. This approach is built upon the framework described in this paper in order to “unpack” and identify these dimensions of role; it is a process for examining and interpreting experience to provide a deeper and more textured understanding of one's role in relation to one's experience and the ongoing events within an organization.

The Organizational Need for Consulting to Role

Negotiating the implications of our framework is a struggle for individuals as they attempt to manage effectively and overcome the daily dilemmas they may face. Any change within an organization (new product or work process, merger, acquisition, and so on) or an organizational role (promotion, increased responsibilities, new team, etc.) creates new challenges and developmental opportunities, as well as inevitable stress or anxiety.

In the absence of any formal process by which to discuss or work on one's role, resources are used ineffectively, energy is wasted, and objectives are often not met. Conflicts remain unaddressed or not understood, and the learning from such events remains unexplored. Individuals and organizations are not typically motivated to delve into areas of tension and in doing so often ignore valuable data about their work processes and ultimate goals.

The reasons individuals are often unable to effectively assume their role are numerous. Commonly recurring reasons that have emerged in the context of ORC projects include:

1. No clear mandate or direction.
2. Difficulties in the role's configuration.
3. Insufficient functional links to complementary roles.
4. Multiple roles (perhaps conflicting) contained in a “single” role.
5. Changing demands on both the formal and informal aspects of the role.
6. Further competency 'and/or skill development for the incumbent.
7. Organizational and/or environmental issues that “spill over” into the role.
8. Personal dilemmas, behaviors, and/ or styles that make functioning in the role difficult.

Several common attributes are often present, and not discretely responsible, for role difficulties and/or the successful performance. Such dilemmas are difficult to sort and solve under the best conditions, with or without external assistance. ORC focuses on these issues, as presenting problems, in order to unearth the complexities and the internal place(s) from which an individual's work role is consciously and/or unconsciously derived and enacted.

Organizational Role Consultation

Role consultation is the work of helping clients *see* their roles through the lens of the framework we have outlined, and then helping them to reconcile its meaning, both individually and organizationally. It is a process by which the consultant and client scrutinize and attune the client's behavior in and understanding of the role, including its conscious and unconscious determinants, to enhance the client's effectiveness in relation to the needs and desires of the organization.

For several years we have been developing a consultation process built on the intellectual traditions of group relations, open systems theory, and psychoanalysis (particularly the object relations and interpersonal schools) in which we consult to an individual's role within an organization. The intention is not to coach individuals through development and the resolution of personal and organizational dilemmas, but to work with them in role on how the role is related to the organizational system. The goal is an understanding of both the realm of the role and the context, the organizational system within which the role is embedded and expected to function.

Within a role consultation, a dyadic relationship between the consultant and client is formed in which reflection and analysis of role within, the framework discussed here, are undertaken. It is a process of experiential co-learning in the context of a risk-diminished work relationship that is

developed over time between the client and consultant. The reflection and analysis task boundary of ORC includes the development issues of both the role occupant and the system.

Benefits of Organizational Role Consultation

The benefits of **ORC** are simultaneously personal and organizational in that this method of consultation strives to examine the intersection of personal and work-related experience and how the intersection of the two becomes productive. The ORC process that is formed in the system of the consultant and client facilitates a sophisticated assessment of role dilemmas, including how individual issues and those in the larger organizational system (taken and given within the context of the task and sentient systems) may contribute to difficulties in role. Among the felicitous outcomes that have emerged from ORC efforts are:

1. More creative and effective strategies, behaviors, and ways of thinking about role, including an “internalized view” of one's role and a more strategic orientation to anticipate future challenges.
2. Opportunities for individuals to explore and clarify work roles and develop a clearer understanding of their strengths and limitations, performance issues, and areas for development, which leads to an increased flexibility in assessing situations and judging one's own responses.
3. Greater clarity regarding how individuals' role situation is influenced by their management style and the manner in which they exercise authority and leadership, along with greater confidence in their own ability to manage and lead in the current and anticipated contexts of their enterprise.
4. Behavior and performance that may be new, unfamiliar, or untested territory and an enhanced ability to use the full range of one's experiences, both emotional and intellectual, as a resource for understanding and monitoring one's own and others' behavior in role.
5. Increased understanding of the individual's contribution to and participation in any sentient system that may be present to serve the organization's overall mission and system of tasks.
6. System-wide understanding of role from the reflection/analysis process used in the consultation.
7. Greater readiness to reflect on and analyze experience as a basis for generating new ideas about the functioning of the organization and to test the data of one's experience in one's decisions, actions, and interactions with others.

Clearly, ORC is not conducted in a vacuum. The consultant works to simultaneously hold both the system as a whole and the client's picture of the system in mind in order to ask the questions that

need to be asked about the individual's role relatedness between and among the parts of the organizational system (especially those questions that the client won't think of or might defend against). Often, these two constructs diverge. The struggle to align these parts is very much at the heart of ORC, as is the struggle to align, productively, the many dimensions of and pressures on role.

How Role Consultation Works

Organizational role consultation involves a series of meetings between a consultant and an individual. The method is an open agenda determined by the client, starting from issues, incidents, dilemmas, and concerns uppermost in her or his mind at the time. Everything the client offers, however personal or anecdotal, is treated as systemically relevant to the work. The content of the ORC work is contracted for in this pair who work together to outline their commonly understood expectations and desired outcomes. It is voluntary and held confidentially to provide a risk diminished space for individuals to think and reflect. Consultants may be hired by the organization, but they work for their immediate clients -- they not engaged in fulfilling some organizational imperative. In this deployment consultants work with and provide feedback to the individual and do not report back to management. Organizational role consultations vary in length, depending on need, and there are no hard and fast rules about ending the consultation. Opportunities to review the consultation's usefulness need to be planned on a regular basis. It is, however, implicit in this method of consultancy that clients will increasingly assume the work of reflection and analysis themselves. Part of the consultation process includes, of course, educating the client on the complexities of role outlined earlier.

None of the individual parts of the framework presented here in isolation can be assumed to be the real definition of an organizational role. It is the awareness of these parts, along with their interrelationships, impact, and, most important, alignment, that helps an individual to reach, to understand, and to effectively work within role. The ORC process has evolved as a means of facilitating an individual's ability to function productively, creatively, competently, and effectively.

Conclusion

Negotiating an organizational role, particularly during a change of strategy, structure, or operating process, is critical to the effectiveness of the change and to the individual expected to carry it; one's role is subject to continuous modification and/or transformation as circumstances within an organization change. It is difficult enough to have to work through the many issues that are known, let alone all those that are a part of the many other processes within an organizational system that get reflected and refracted through a role.

We are reminded of the case of a President of an international division spanning Australia, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America who originally approached us to help him with the difficulty of never having enough time with his regional Vice Presidents and being unable to bring

them together as a “team.” Although this story is long and complicated, spanning more than 4 years, the result exemplifies the difficulties of *knowing* the right outcome, especially considering the various complexities of organizational life.

This consultation began with an effort to help the executives learn about their units and themselves (through ORC), resulting in improved productivity during a period of expansive growth (income quadrupled over the life cycle of the consultation to about \$2 billion). The consultation entailed issues such as organizational alignment, staff to line responsibilities, the maturing of relatively new disparate country and regional units, helping executives in role, and so on. Two years into the project, the President began to “internalize” the worry of his executives' work lives and development. He concluded that he might be in the way of further progress (stylistically, symbolically, technically, etc.) and decided to retire. He and his team formed a new international unit focused on an emerging world regions and integrated the rest of the prior organization, which now represented mature markets, with well-established parts of the firm. Had anyone predicted his retirement to a team member, or the President himself, less than 1 year before his retirement, they would have thought it unimaginable.

Understanding the pressures of markets and competition is the venue of the professional business person, but understanding the intricacies of what motivates them to function in the way that they do on a day-to-day basis usually does not fall under that purview. Role, as we have outlined, is a complicated component of organizational life that contains many available, yet often unknown or unrecognized factors. Helping individuals sort these factors, identifying what is relevant to the responsibilities they have been given and then helping them further note what they are bringing to the system of tasks is complicated, a complexity exacerbated by the sentient nature of all these separate, collected, and interrelated acts.

We believe that the emerging framework and method for thinking about and consulting to organizational role presented here can make a valuable contribution to the process of learning, improving, and effecting change as necessary. Organizational role consultation is a means of making the unknown known, of surfacing the change that has yet to be discovered, and of grounding people to their role, each other, and their organization.

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