

St. John's University  
EDU 5300 – Organizational Theory and Planned Change  
Frank Smith

#### Unit VII. Part I -- Structural

What are the competing metaphors/ theories about how organizations work?

Metaphors to explain how organizations work have been evident at least since the time of Moses and the ancient Chinese civilizations. The more serious attempts to study organizations and to explain their workings in “scientific” or theoretical terms is more recent. Over the last 100 years, American students of organization have developed a series of metaphors and theories to explain how organizations work. The first major American advocate of a perspective was Frederic W. Taylor, called the father of scientific management. For Taylor, the proper metaphor for the organization was a machine. Human workers were seen as extensions of machines and both were to work highly efficiently. The worker was viewed in simple economic terms; that is, the worker was assumed to work only for money and he was paid mostly on a per piece basis, the more he produced the more he got paid. The worker was not viewed as having any other interests or motives: he simply worked for pay.

#### Rise of Science and Industry

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, American was undergoing rapid change as an industrial nation. Americans became aware of the power of the scientific method as a tool to observe patterns in nature and to develop theoretical explanations about natural phenomena. These explanations could then serve as a basis for the creation of inventions, such as the electrical system.

#### Applying Science to Human Activity

Some people, such as Taylor, thought that the methods of natural science could appropriately be applied to human activity. In addition, scientific thought in general was influenced by the theory of evolution. Herbert Spencer, took the basic ideas of Charles Darwin and articulated them in a view known as social Darwinism. It was Spencer who coined the term “survival of the fittest,” using it to apply to the fate of rich and poor in a laissez faire capitalist society. Spencer convinced Andrew Carnegie that it was natural and proper for a person such as Carnegie to rise to great wealth. According to this theory, competition, not cooperation, was the hallmark of nature and of human society. Following this line of thinking, combined with the notions of Adam Smith, the predominant view of society became the “economic man” theory of the market, not the view that emphasized the citizen of the community. People lived for their own self interest and made exchanges in the marketplace to benefit their own interests.

#### The Influence of Human Intention

What is missing in this theory or perspective is recognition that human imagination and intention have the power to design and modify human institutions and that social life in the community is driven by cooperation as well as competition. The scientific method is a

process of inquiry in which man studies his environment in order to design his own cultural context. While man cannot control nature, he can direct his interpretation of events. In other words, unlike rocks and wind, human society is not bound by the observed laws of the natural world. Human beings can influence, if not control, the direction of their own destiny. What is currently observed to be the case today has not always been true and is not inevitably true for all ages. As Dewey noted, society is emerging or becoming as human beings working cooperatively make decisions about the problems they face. Taylor's approach assumed that human activity was stable and unchanging; thus, work should be highly standardized. He failed to see that the worker himself could change his activity to be more effective. Furthermore, he failed to see that segments of the society are interdependent, so that changes in one activity leads to changes in other segments. The arrival of the electric motor, for example, while it was not made originally for work in the mills, would change the way workers in the mill did they work. Thus, Taylor's intricate observations of labor in the mill was made obsolete by the changes brought by the electric motor. As with the IGE wall charts, the workers often come up with ideas about work that are better than the ideas of the supervisors and managers. Taylor did not believe this was true.

### Dumb Workers and Repetition

Taylor's scientific management theory/ metaphor developed in this milieu of social Darwinism. Taylor saw work as a set of physical actions, as motions in time that could be standardized and made highly efficient by specifying the one best way to do the work. Once that best way was observed, the worker was trained, and the worker was supervised, the whole work process would be highly efficient. Taylor's time/motion studies rested on one set of principles: physical fatigue limits physical action. Thus, the proper balance of action and rest is more efficient than straight action. Because his immigrant workers were both limited in their use of English and un-schooled in physiology, Taylor saw them as "dumb." He truly believed that the "best worker is like an ox," a person who only engages in repetitious work as directed. This metaphor, the good worker as an ox, means that workers were not to think, were not to have emotions or affection for one another, were not to collaborate, were not to judge the quality of their own work situation. This perspective was brought over into education, with the notions that teaching should be impersonal, standardized, closely supervised, and non-collaborative.

### Emphasis on Structure of Pieces

There was also a strong emphasis upon structure. The assumption was that if one could get the correct time/motion specifications for each job for each individual and these isolated jobs or pieces were put in the proper sequence, much like the assembly line, then the machine would work perfectly. Thus, the need to specify each job carefully and place the pieces in the proper structure. While the scientific management people thought that there was only one best way to do a job and only one best way to structure a work situation, the reality is that in any situation the mathematical possibilities for arranging the pieces is usually infinite. There is not just one way or one best way to arrange the pieces; there are many ways and they all work.

### Key Questions for the Structural Frame

Robert V. Carlson in Reframing & Reform: Perspectives on Organization, Leadership and School Change suggests that the power of each metaphor is captured in the key questions that reflect the central concepts of the metaphor or theory. He writes the following explanation.

The questions provided for each of the metaphors are not intended to be all inclusive; no doubt more can be added and others can be rephrased. It is not clear whether any sequence of questions is better than any other, nor should one expect to get 'correct' or unambiguous answers. The questions should, however, prompt insights that may go undiscovered in a more casual, superficial diagnosis. At a minimum, we might consider the use of these questions as a first step in the reflection and reframing process (p. 116).

In other words, the different metaphors help us to raise a different set of questions about a situation or organization and thereby help us to see aspects that we might not otherwise see. We have taken Carlson's set of questions and modified them, as he noted we might.

To study the structural frame in more depth, go to the resources folder and read Structural VII.1. It provides a set of assumptions as provided by Bolman and Deal in Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership (2003) and the set of key questions. The references to chapters are to the Gareth Morgan text Images of Organizations.