What changes when organizations change? A symposium on organizational psychodynamics

All fixed, fast-frozen relationships, with their train of venerable ideas and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become obsolete before they can ossify.

—Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 1848

The preoccupation with change characteristic of modern organizations is nothing new. It merely expresses at the level of organizations the preoccupation with change that typifies the spirit of modernity. Those who study organizations often do so with the goal of finding ways to foster and direct change. Yet, identifying change and the factors that bring it about poses significant problems. In organizations, structure changes; personnel change; product lines change; mission and goals get redefined. Yet, for those interested in organizational psychodynamics, all of these changes and others often deemed important in organizations may be markers not of change, but of an ever more intense organizational stasis. Here, we have a close analogy with individual change. Individuals may change jobs, political affiliations, personal attachments, but in so doing change little that matters in their emotional experience of the world. Rather than bringing about change, these alterations simply reenact what Ronald Fairbairn refers to as a “frozen drama.” What, then, considering the organization’s emotional life, does it mean for an organization to change? What factors, both intended and unintended, bring about change in the emotional reality of the organization? And, why is the idea of change such a compelling part of organizational life?

In psychoanalytic literature, we find discussion of change under headings such as the “aims and goals of psychoanalysis,” its “therapeutic effectiveness,” “curative factors” and “therapeutic action.” None of these concepts, however, transfer easily to the organizational setting. Clearly it is problematic to speak of altering psychic structure or moderating the harshness of the superego when our concern is with organizations rather than individuals. How then do we speak of the kind of change in organizations with which those applying psychoanalysis to organizational dynamics are concerned? What is it that changes and through what process? And what fosters that change? Questions of the nature and direction of change clearly involve us in normative judgment about organizations. This raises another question implicit in the questions already raised: What are the appropriate normative criteria we use to judge organizations and organizational change?

These are the questions we invite you to explore for our Symposium. We intend to publish contributions to this Symposium either as a special issue of the Journal or as a special
section in a series of issues. We also envision a book on this subject bringing together contributions to the Symposium. We are interested not only in fully developed papers but also in shorter thought pieces. The focus of the Symposium will be on the study of organizations rather than on the practical issues encountered in organizational consulting, although more general reflections stimulated by practical experience are welcome. We anticipate publishing the Symposium early this coming year. Please let us know if you think you might be able to make a contribution.

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