WHERE DOES IT HURT?

Health and Disharmony in Organizational Ecosystems

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Before I became an organizational development consultant, almost 20 years ago, I was an acupuncturist and the academic dean of an acupuncture school. While I no longer use needles to help my clients heal, acupuncture philosophy continues to guide my work. Acupuncturists see health as balance in the flow of energy, known as "Qi," within the body. Disease is the result of a disruption in the natural flow of Qi within the integrated system of the body. Disharmony in the flow of Qi—too much or too little Qi, or a distortion in the quality of Qi—creates disease.

Like the human body, organizations are living, energetic entities. When their Qi is balanced and flowing in harmony, they function in healthy ways. When energy is deficient or ineffectively applied, there is organizational disharmony.

One way to understanding energetic flow in organizations is to view them as living ecosystems comprised of four concentric layers: Individual, Team, Organizational and Societal.
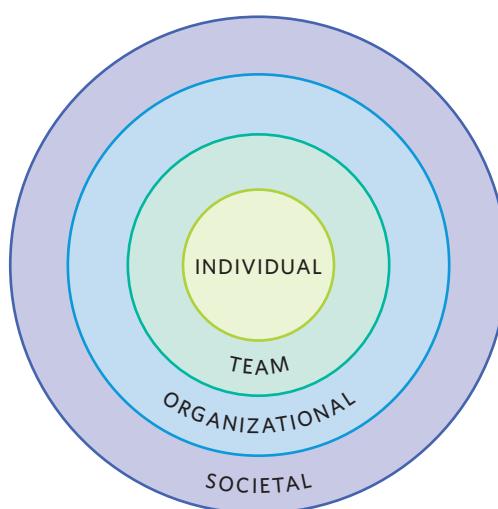

Figure 1: A Model of the Organizational Ecosystem

The Individual Layer is at the center of the ecosystem. This layer is made up of us, the people whose energy and effort is the lifeblood of an organization. Organizations are, ultimately, collections of infinitely complex individuals, with all the gifts and baggage we bring. The second layer out is the Team Layer. This is where individuals meet. It contains interpersonal relationships, group dynamics and work processes. If the Individual Layer is where we are in our relationship to ourselves, the Team Layer is made up of the ways we are in relationship with each other, both interpersonally and in our work processes. Even in organizations that consist of only one team, the Team Layer is distinct from the third layer, the Organizational Layer. The Organizational Layer contains the organization's "Guiding Ideas" (mission, purpose, and values), strategy, structures, resource, infrastructure and policies. The Organizational Layer, along with the most exterior layer, the Societal Layer, provides the context for teams, individuals and their work. The Societal Layer contains the factors that are outside of the actual organizational entity, but still influence and inform the work of the organization. These factors include laws, mores, culture, and history.
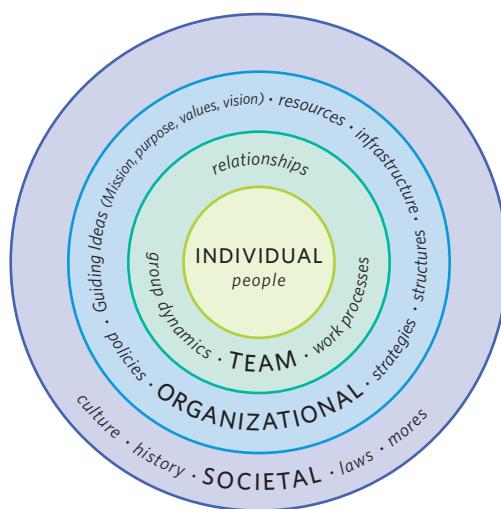

Figure 2: Elements of the Layers

Energy flows dynamically between these layers, whose effectiveness depends on both the flow and quality of that energy. What happens in one layer impacts the other layers. For example, if we are thinking about complications with our

team, we don't always think about the influence each individual member has on the team, nor how the organization's policies and values impact team dynamics. It is rarer still for people to consider how societal influences, such as racism and other social illnesses, affect the dynamics of a team.

The flow of energy and influence between the layers has different intensities and impacts. The outer layers have a more intense influence on interior layers, while interior layers can exert a more subtle influence outward.
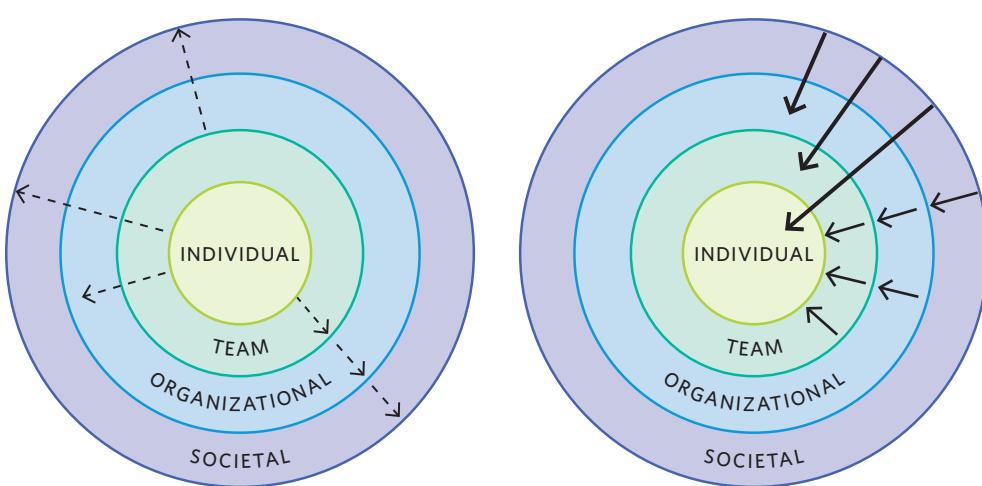

Figure 3: Subtler influence from interior to exterior   *Figure 4:* More intense influence from exterior to interior

The influence of the Individual Layer on the more exterior layers is typically most subtle. With rare, albeit notable, examples, it is difficult for single individuals to visibly impact society. In contrast, the Societal Layer, which is the outermost layer, has the most intense influence on the internal layers. One need only look at the impact of fashion trends on individual clothing choices for confirmation.

Before acupuncturists choose points for treatment, they must first understand where disharmony in the flow of energy is occurring. Similarly, when we design organizational interventions to catalyze growth or improvement, or to address unclear, stuck or painful situations, it is important to be as clear as possible about the quality and flow of organizational energy.

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Often, when organizations are looking to grow or heal, they self-diagnose what they need—for example, a strategic plan, board development or leadership coaching. However, it often turns out to be difficult to see the fullness of our own situations from the inside. While the identified interventions may indeed be useful, they can fail to address roots of disharmony or opportunity at levels of the ecosystem that have not been considered. Because there is a constant flow of influence between the layers, it can be challenging to tease out the roots of disharmony. But for sustained results, we must address disharmony's roots, as well as its branches.

In the pages that follow, I present a framework for viewing organizational challenges and opportunities within the context of the four layers of organizational ecosystems. All of the layers are living subsystems within the ecosystem. And all living systems require tending over time to maintain or restore health.

This framework can be used to understand how the different layers influence each other and the ecosystem as a whole, and to identify and design appropriate interventions to foster, create, or restore organizational harmony.

This framework is particularly geared to mission-driven organizations concerned with social justice. Beginning at the interior of the ecosystem and moving out, from Individual to Team to Organizational to Society, the discussions of each layer below include a picture of harmony and disharmony in the layer, examples of how the layer influences and is influenced by other layers, a set of diagnostic questions for assessing the health of the layer, and some interventions that I have found to be particularly effective for maintaining health, fostering growth, or addressing disharmonies.
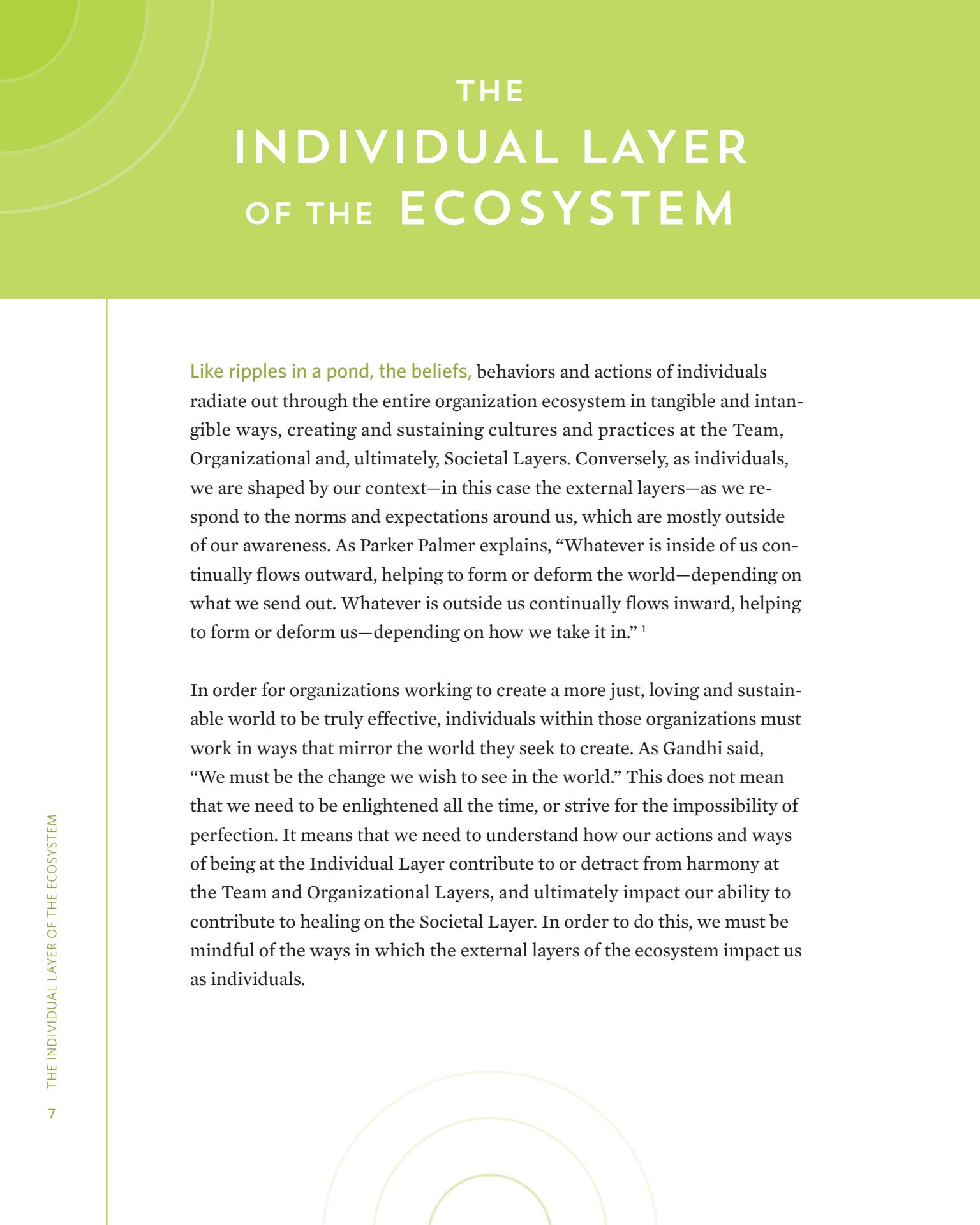
THE
INDIVIDUAL LAYER
OF THE ECOSYSTEM

Like ripples in a pond, the beliefs, behaviors and actions of individuals radiate out through the entire organization ecosystem in tangible and intangible ways, creating and sustaining cultures and practices at the Team, Organizational and, ultimately, Societal Layers. Conversely, as individuals, we are shaped by our context—in this case the external layers—as we respond to the norms and expectations around us, which are mostly outside of our awareness. As Parker Palmer explains, "Whatever is inside of us continually flows outward, helping to form or deform the world—depending on what we send out. Whatever is outside us continually flows inward, helping to form or deform us—depending on how we take it in." [1]

In order for organizations working to create a more just, loving and sustainable world to be truly effective, individuals within those organizations must work in ways that mirror the world they seek to create. As Gandhi said, "We must be the change we wish to see in the world." This does not mean that we need to be enlightened all the time, or strive for the impossibility of perfection. It means that we need to understand how our actions and ways of being at the Individual Layer contribute to or detract from harmony at the Team and Organizational Layers, and ultimately impact our ability to contribute to healing on the Societal Layer. In order to do this, we must be mindful of the ways in which the external layers of the ecosystem impact us as individuals.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Some Signs of Harmony at the Individual Layer

- Individuals are aware of their own behavior, patterns and preferences. They take responsibility for their actions and the impact they have on others.
- Individuals bring their full, authentic selves to their work.
- Individuals have clarity of purpose and find alignment and satisfaction in the work they do.
- Individuals give and receive constructive feedback.
- Individuals strategically prioritize how they spend their time in order to achieve their desired impacts.

Some Signs of Disharmony at the Individual Layer

- Individuals place blame on others rather than reflecting on their own involvement in problematic situations.
- Individuals see themselves as victims, rather than as empowered actors.
- Individuals do not show respect for the identities and traditions of others.
- Individuals experience martyrdom and boundary confusion, which can manifest as overwork, excessive complaining or taking on impossible levels of responsibility.

The key ingredient for harmony at the Individual Layer is what I and many others call Personal Leadership—the ability to understand ourselves, in our own beings and in relationship with the outside world. Personal Leadership enables us to be aware of and take responsibility for how our behavior and choices impact others, as well as how the forces of our environment shape our ways of seeing and understanding ourselves and our world.

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As individuals, we are a complex mix of our character, culture, identity and context.[2] When we look at the behavior and interactions of people in organizations, we need to ask both what individuals have brought with them to the organization and how the Team and Organizational Layers are affecting them.

There is no doubt that some people bring toxic attitudes and difficult behaviors with them wherever they go. The person who gossips incessantly or bullies and intimidates others can have a damaging effect on a workplace. These behaviors evidence low Personal Leadership, that is, a lack of understanding of our own inner workings and the relationship between ourselves and our context, as well as a lack of responsibility for the consequences of our actions. Low Personal Leadership at the Individual Layer contributes to poor relationship dynamics and ineffective work processes, which lead to disharmony at the Team and Organizational Layers.

However, all too often, I see leaders and organizations avoiding looking at disharmonies in the Team or Organizational Layers by blaming situations that aren't working on the characters or failings of individuals. It is critical to distinguish between stubborn habits, personality traits or lack of Personal Leadership skills (for example, inability to follow through, poor communication and habitual negativity), and behaviors that arise as a result of a less than optimal team or organizational contexts (for example, unclear job descriptions or disrespect for one's cultural identity), which can lead to confusing and ineffectual behaviors as people try to figure out how to thrive in a context that doesn't make sense to them.

Conversely, I have seen situations where people are afraid or reluctant to confront people who are evidencing disrespectful or destructive behaviors that are causing disharmony. Rather than hold an individual accountable for their behaviors, leaders may inappropriately apply interventions at the Team Layer. While the team may be in rough shape, and trust and relationships may well be damaged, unless the difficult habitual behaviors of individuals are also addressed at the Individual Layer where they are rooted, team interventions will not succeed.

The ability of individuals to engage in honest communication is essential for organizational health. Though it can cause short-term discomfort in some situations, it is important not to mistake the discomfort that can come from telling the truth for disharmony. Disharmony is caused by lack of honest feedback, oblique communications and not being honest about our needs and limits, all of which make authentic relationships and real trust impossible. These difficulties can be rooted in lack of skill at the Individual Layer, or in the cultures of the Team or Organizational Layers. Still, an absence of honest communication and effective conflict resolution skills in the Individual Layer can cause enormous problems at the Team Layer by precluding the development of the trust needed for a high performing team.

A critically important element of Personal Leadership is awareness of identity and relative privilege and an understanding of how societal influences typically advantage or disadvantage different identities.

A critically important element of Personal Leadership is awareness of identity and relative privilege and an understanding of how societal influences typically advantage or disadvantage different identities. One way individuals can influence the Team, Organizational and perhaps even Societal Layers is by actively working to counter the use of identity to exclude people on the basis of gender, race, class, culture, sexuality, physical ability, etc. A commitment to continually uncovering, understanding and striving not to operate from our own internal biases or internalized oppression requires high Personal Leadership. Individuals who don't have this commitment often contribute, through their behavior and the structures and strategies they create, to disharmony at the Team and Organizational Layers. And ultimately, these behaviors and attitudes keep systemic oppression and toxic mores in place at the Societal Layer.

I have seen many people who practice high Personal Leadership achieve remarkable and even unlikely outcomes; they offer inspirational examples of how to rise above reflexive responses to challenges posed by the more exterior layers of the ecosystem. Utilizing Personal Leadership, people can

access their inner resources, find higher ground and take action at the Individual Layer from a place of compassion for themselves and others, healing Team and Organizational disharmonies, and radiating out, ultimately, to impact the Societal Layer.

One of my long-term client organizations had two departments that worked closely together. Although these departments were taking care of regular business and meeting their expectations, they were not delivering more impactful outcomes that many thought were possible. Women leaders of different racial backgrounds, both of whom I coached, led the departments. The leader of the organization talked with each of the women and saw that something was impeding the potential of the collaboration between the departments. She asked me to facilitate a series of conversations between the department leaders. When we met, each woman told the story of how she understood the situation, the disappointment and frustration she held, and the impact it had on her. Feelings were bruised. But instead of operating from hurt and betrayal, possible cultural assumptions and mistrust, each woman came to the table willing to talk truthfully and listen deeply.

Although their honest conversations were sometimes painful, they came to see how the absence of shared understanding about their roles and the relationship between their departments had led to misunderstanding. Additionally, each saw ways in which their own behaviors had exacerbated the situation, causing disharmony in the Team Layer that contained their mutual work. It would have been easy for them to stake out their territories and remain stuck in conflict. However, because of their ability to fully listen, and their shared commitment to fostering change at the Societal Layer, they were able to restore trust. Eventually, they realized that they needed a solution at the Organizational Layer, a change in the structural relationships between their departments. But they could not have identified that structural shift without the Personal Leadership each cultivated in herself, which allowed for the restoration of trust, as well as a culture at the Organizational Layer, fostered by the top leader, that highly valued relationships and honesty and made it possible for them to engage in authentic dialogue and arrive at a new solution from a refreshed place of understanding.

Cultivating and practicing Personal Leadership is life-long work requiring both humility and courage: the humility to know that we are always a work in progress, that we never arrive at a place of perfection where we are done with our inner work; the courage to look in the mirror and honestly identify where we have opportunity to grow, and how we may be influenced by our context—the external layers of the ecosystem—in ways we may not have recognized. There is no doubt that this is hard work, but it is also a daring and infinite life journey.

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS

The questions below can help differentiate disharmonies with primary roots at the Individual Layer from disharmonies that have their roots—or at least significant contributing factors—at more exterior systemic layers. Conversations with struggling individuals and formal assessments can help to identify if a disharmony has roots at the Individual Layer, and if there is an opportunity to cultivate the Personal Leadership of an individual in order to support the health of the entire ecosystem. This can guide the choice of interventions to address identified issues.

Questions for Individuals

- What do you enjoy most about your work?
- What is most challenging for you about your work?
- What is your sense of the purpose of your work?
  How does your work contribute to overall organizational goals?
- Do you have the support and resources you need to do your job?
- Do you have all the skills and capacities needed to do your job?
- Is this the job that you would ideally like to be doing?
  If not, what would you like to be different?
- Does the structure and culture of your team and the organization allow you to do your best work?
- How do you reflect on your work and rejuvenate yourself?
- What are your learning and growth goals?
- Do you feel honored and affirmed in your identity in the workplace?

Questions about Individuals

These questions can guide supervisors in an assessment, or be included as a part of an evaluation that solicits input from other stakeholders (e.g., colleagues, peers, supervisees, clients, etc.) .

- Does this person deliver what they are accountable for?
  Do they do what they say they will do when they say they will do it?
- What impact does this person's behavior have on others?
- How does this person contribute to shared goals? Are there any barriers or obstacles to them doing their best work?
- Does this person treat others with respect?
- Does this person communicate effectively?
- Does this person listen well?
- How well does this person incorporate feedback?

SOME POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS

If you determine that some degree of organizational disharmony lies with an individual (or multiple individuals), or that Personal Leadership development would help the organization reach its goals, it may be useful to consider some of these activities. Ideally, these are not used as punitive measures or as a last resort, but rather as opportunities for growth, learning and improvement.

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It is often important to attend to Personal Leadership development alongside Team or Organizational Layer interventions. For example, if an organization is engaged in strategic planning, it can be enormously beneficial to foster the Personal Leadership of the people who will guide the planning process and implementation of the plan.

Just as an acupuncturist selects points based on an individual's distinct pattern of energy flow, activities designed to foster Personal Leadership must be tailored to an individual's distinct needs. These can include:

- *Coaching.* Coaching can be a great gift for both personal and professional development. Coaches help people to identify goals, barriers and strategies for success as well as to overcome patterns and habits that work against their Personal Leadership.
- *Leadership Training.* Personal Leadership development requires attention to both the internal and external. Leaders must continually deepen their understanding of themselves and their inner resources while also building skills and tools for action. The most effective leadership training addresses both internal and external aspects of leadership.
- *Performance evaluation.* An evaluation, which can be done as part of coaching, can give individuals direct feedback about how they are (or are not) contributing to organizational goals and the impact their behavior has on others. An important note: All too often I see evaluation used as a punitive measure when there is already an identified problem. Evaluation should be ongoing and seen as an opportunity for growth and improvement.
- *Regular supervision.* I often see leaders underestimating the value of supervision. Effective supervision grounded in relationship and mentoring fosters Personal Leadership development.
- *Training on diversity and inclusion.* There are many approaches to helping individuals build awareness and skills for relationships and collaboration across difference. It is important that this work be seen not as a one-time task, but rather as an ongoing and valued priority within the organization.
- *Mindfulness training.* Meditation, yoga and other methods can help individuals cultivate internal awareness of their motivations and patterns and build resilience. These practices also help reduce stress responses.
- *Change.* Sometimes people are simply not the right fit for their positions. This might mean reconfiguring a job description to make the workload more realistic or to capitalize on the individual's skill. It could also mean finding another role for the individual within the organization. And sometimes it means parting ways entirely.

THE
TEAM LAYER
OF THE ECOSYSTEM

The Team is a distinct layer in the organizational ecosystem, even in organizations made up of a single team. The Team Layer encompasses the interpersonal relationships and work processes through which the work gets done, while the Organizational Layer provides the focus and structure for the work (see below). Team dynamics, meetings, communication, information flow and project management all live in the Team Layer.

Teams within an organization might include the board of directors, the management team, functional teams and project teams, that is, any groups of people who come together to get work done. The Organizational Layer provides the direct context for the Team Layer by dictating the explicit parameters and constraints, as well as the culture and resources, within which the team does its work. At the same time, the Team Layer is comprised of individuals, who bring their Individual Layer harmonies and disharmonies with them into their work; it also provides the context for the Individual Layer and the opportunity for individuals to practice and grow their Personal Leadership.

It is sometimes difficult to separate the Team Layer from the Organizational Layer, but doing so provides a more precise lens through which to understand the whole of the ecosystem and to pinpoint areas of disharmony and opportunities for growth. In sum, if it has to do with how people are working together, relationships, dynamics and work processes, it is part of the Team Layer.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Some Signs of Harmony at the Team Layer

- The team knows and meets its goals. It has metrics to measure and celebrate success.
- Team members understand that the team is greater than the sum of its parts. The success of individuals is understood to be important to the success of the team and vice versa.
- Team members see each other as resources and seek each other out for support.
- Team members are energized and excited to be at work.
- Regular team meetings have a clear purpose, are well run and are seen as valuable to team members.
- Decision-making processes and roles are clear and consistently followed.
- The team communicates clearly and effectively and team members have the information they need to do their work.
- Team members express their needs to each other and offer helpful feedback in constructive and respectful ways.

Some Signs of Disharmony at the Team Layer

- The team misses its performance targets.
- There is low trust among team members. Team members do not feel that they can count on each other.
- Team members operate in silos, unaware of each other's work and thus missing opportunities for collaboration.
- Team members are tired and uninspired.
- Team members talk negatively behind each other's backs rather than directly addressing issues and giving valuable feedback.
- Team members are confused about how decisions are made and who is included when.
- Team members are not held accountable for their behavior and the quality of their work. Poor results are tolerated. (This pattern may also come from the Organizational Layer.)
- Team members continually feel buried under their workload. (This can also result from lack of Personal Leadership at the Individual Layer or structural or cultural factors at the Organizational Layer).

Much interpersonal conflict in organizations comes from lack of clarity about goals, roles and responsibilities at the Team Layer. Team members need to understand their own priorities and how those priorities align with larger goals set at the Team or Organizational Layers. They also need to know what they can count on from each other. When it's unclear who makes what decisions, and how and when those decisions

Clear, consistent leadership that allows for the emergence of partnership, creativity and collaboration is a key contributor to harmony at the Team Layer.

are made, misunderstandings result. These kinds of misunderstandings can feel personal and thus are easily confused with problems at the Individual Layer, especially when confusing behaviors are ascribed to character flaws. Absence of shared understanding and agreement about who is doing what and how work will get done can lead to turf struggles and/or erosion of trust, as in the example of the two women leaders above, whose Personal Leadership ultimately enabled them to identify solutions at the Team and Organizational Layers.

Honest communication is both a symptom and a cause of harmony at the Team Layer. Team members bring their own ways of working to the team and conflict is a natural and expected part of teams. In fact, healthy conflict is essential for creativity and transformation. When the team leader or culture approaches conflict in ways that build fear, or when a team suppresses conflict entirely, mistrust, stagnation or negativity can result. Harmony at the Team Layer requires trust that conflicts can be navigated in respectful ways.

Clear, consistent leadership that allows for the emergence of partnership, creativity and collaboration is a key contributor to harmony at the Team Layer. In other words, effective leaders, strong in their own Personal Leadership, create a context that supports the Personal Leadership of team members and hence enables the team to thrive.

A disharmony I see frequently at the Team Layer is busyness, overwork and overextension. This can cause competition or overwhelm among team members and impedes true collaboration. It may be rooted in Team or Organizational Layer cultures that value these behaviors and confuse busyness with impact, or it may arise from lack of Personal Leadership in the Individual Layer and a need to be seen as valuable at all costs.

Clarity from the Organizational Layer is a significant contributor to harmony at the Team Layer. The organization sets the "charge" (mission, purpose, goals) and constraints (e.g., budgets, policies and often structures) for the team. Team leaders are responsible for making sure the charge and constraints are actually put into practice. When the Organizational Layer does not provide a clear sense of purpose, explicit parameters, effective structures and resources for support and accountability, teams tend to struggle. Time and energy can be spent at cross purposes when there are differing understanding of why the team exists, what it is supposed to be doing and how it is supposed to be doing it.

Authentic, high performing teams depend upon team members who cultivate and practice Personal Leadership as well as a team context that supports and rewards authentic communication. Such a context or culture is critical to the functional relationships and processes that create harmony at the Team Layer. Creating this kind of culture requires risk and vulnerability. The short-term discomforts and potential destabilization that accompany telling the truth of one's experience are often a disincentive to doing the work

> *Authentic, high performing teams depend upon team members who cultivate and practice Personal Leadership as well as a team context that supports and rewards authentic communication.*

needed to build high trust at the Team Layer. One of the central tenets of the Black Lives Matter movement is "Moving at the Speed of Trust." I love this because it acknowledges that real change toward love and justice is rooted in trust at the Team Layer.

A long-term client of mine offers a great example of attending to the Team Layer in order to support growth of the whole ecosystem. The organization had an executive transition toward the end of a five-year strategic plan, and they knew that a new strategic plan was in order. However, they also wanted to challenge themselves to think differently than they had in the past. In order to prepare for the next planning process, once the new leadership was in place, the management team engaged in extensive team building and leadership development together. They did this so they could have honest, hard conversations to open themselves up to potential new ways of seeing and doing their work. Only after they learned about their individual leadership styles, looked at their team culture and ways of being together, and built their capacity for honest dialogue did they begin strategic planning. As they hoped, investing in Personal Leadership development and building interpersonal and group trust at the Team Layer allowed them to develop and implement an exciting and breakthrough strategic plan that became the basis for all of their work.

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS

When diagnosing whether a disharmony has roots at the Team Layer, it is important to hear from all members of the team, not just its leaders. Getting a fuller picture is critical to distinguishing between issues rooted in the Individual and Organizational Layer, and what is actually rooted in the relationships and work process at the Team Layer. This can be done through interviews and/or surveys, depending upon the team's needs, the size of the team and which method will yield the most honest answers and foster trust for possible future interventions. This kind of assessment is often best done by someone external to the team, and perhaps even to the organization, who can objectively hear and synthesize the experiences of team members and reflect them back in a neutral and compassionate way.

Some Diagnostic Questions include:

- What is the purpose of this team? Is this understanding shared by all team members?
- Does this team deliver on its goals and commitments? If not, why not?
  - What is the quality of relationships between team members?
  - Is there trust?
- Do team members feel they can rely on each other?
- Do team members see team meetings as productive and meaningful?
- Is there a shared understanding of team members' roles and responsibilities?
- How are decisions made? Are processes and roles clear to all team members?
- What is the quality of team communication, both formal and informal?
  - How is information shared between team members?
  - Do team members give and receive all the information they need?
  - Do team members find their communications with one another satisfying, or do they avoid communication?
- How does the team handle conflict and disagreement?
- How is difference in identity and culture handled within the team?
- How does the team reflect on its work and continually learn and improve together?

SOME POSSIBLE TEAM LAYER INTERVENTIONS

Appropriate interventions to address team disharmonies, or to maintain the health of a team, can be designed only after an assessment that gives a clear and accurate picture of where things are stuck or could be strengthened. Engaging in team interventions to grow and improve as a team, even when there is no overt disharmony, is a great sign of health. And just as individual interventions can, and often should, happen alongside Team and Organizational Layer interventions, team interventions are often a complement to, or even require, Organizational or Personal Layer interventions in order to be most effective.

Engaging in team interventions to grow and improve as a team, even when there is no overt disharmony, is a great sign of health.

Once again, in order to really shift the energy at any layer in the ecosystem, interventions must be designed to meet a team's specific condition. Depending upon the unique needs of the team, these are some possible Team Layer interventions:

- **Conflict resolution.** If there is active conflict that can't be resolved easily, or if trust is frayed, employing a process with a neutral facilitator, such as facilitated dialogues, restorative circles or mediation, helps create a space where people can hear each other in new and nuanced ways and can see each other and their situation in a new light.
- **Communication training.** Participating in communication skills and/or conflict resolution training as a team can provide a shared language for working together, build skills for respectfully and generatively engaging in conflict, and foster authentic working relationships.
- **Team building.** As Meg Wheatly says, "You don't fear people whose stories you know." [3] Intentional team building enables team members to share their stories and deepen relationships and trust. This can be done in myriad ways such as meaningful team field trips or personality and behavioral assessments to deepen awareness of work and leadership styles.
- **Planning.** If team members do not have clarity about their work, creating a shared sense of purpose, clarifying roles and creatively co-designing the team's work can create cohesion, particularly if the planning process is done in a transparent way that fosters relationships and trust.
- **Improve team meetings.** Creating agendas with clear and purposeful desired outcomes, and processes to meet those outcomes, helps ensure that team meetings are a meaningful use of time.
- **Clarify team agreements.** Team members can discuss and agree upon the norms and behaviors they expect from each other. For instance, they might make agreements about how they want to access each other (e.g., popping into one another's offices or scheduling interactions via email) and then check in regularly about how well they are keeping their agreements.
- **Structure time for communication and relationship-building.** I have seen teams set up simple structures—check-ins at staff meetings, quarterly retreats to take the "team temperature," agreements to let each other know if a line has been crossed—that allow them consistently to have honest and

respectful conversations that build grace and trust. Some teams continually build connections and relationships by regularly coming together for lunch or tea during the work day or going out for drinks after work.

- *Clarify accountability and decision-making.* Clarify roles and responsibilities. This includes articulating all key areas of work and who is responsible for making which kinds of decisions. It is important that the Organizational Layer provide tools for accountability—e.g., job descriptions and performance evaluations—that can be used at the Team Layer. It is also important that team members know what kinds of decisions they will and won't be involved with, and what their roles will be.
- *Leadership development.* Participating in leadership training as a team can strengthen relationships and trust and build a shared set of skills and tools among the team.
- *Peer coaching.* Formal relationships can be developed between colleagues to provide feedback and support for each other. These dyads can meet regularly or as needed. This format can be a win/win/win as team members build trust in each other, develop coaching skills by acting as coaches and foster their Personal Leadership through being coached.
- *Time for reflection and planning.* It is a radical act to build such time into the workday. A disciplined practice of reflection, what Stephen Covey calls "Sharpening the Saw," [4] requires both high Personal Leadership (to take the time) and a supportive environment.

THE
ORGANIZATIONAL LAYER
OF THE ECOSYSTEM

Ideas, ideologies and infrastructure, rather than individuals and relationships, guide the Organizational and Societal Layers of the ecosystem. These two outermost layers provide the context for teams and individuals. The Organizational Layer contains the organization's "Guiding Ideas" (mission, purpose, and values), strategy, structures, resources, infrastructure and policies. It is the container within which the work at the Team Layer resides.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Some Signs of Harmony at the Organizational Layer

- There is shared understanding and enthusiasm throughout the organization about its purpose, where it is headed and why.
- The organization meets or exceeds its intended goals and is actively working toward achieving its intended impact.
- The organization has the resources it needs (human, financial, etc.) to do its work and manages these resources well.
- Staff trust leaders to make sound and thoughtful decisions and know that they will be included as appropriate.
- The organization continually learns, improves and adapts to changing needs and circumstances in a timely, thoughtful way.

Some Signs of Disharmony at the Organizational Layer

- Organizational aspirations and rhetoric do not match the resources allocated for implementation.
- The organization has a toxic culture. That is, normative behavior does not support respect or the health of individuals.
- Staff and teams work at cross purposes, duplicate efforts or miss opportunities for synergizing.
- Organizational priorities change perpetually and quickly, often leading to lack of follow through.
- Staff do not have a shared understanding of overall direction and how individual work aligns with larger goals.

Clarity of "Guiding Ideas" is key to health at the Organizational Layer of the ecosystem. These ideas include an articulation of why the organization exists (purpose), the beliefs on which it stands (values or guiding principles), what it is here to do (mission), the impact it seeks to have as a result of its work (vision), what it believes needs to happen in order to achieve that impact (Theory of Change) and what it hopes to accomplish in the near, medium and long term (Goals and Objectives). It is both a cause and a symptom of health when all members of an organization clearly understand and are aligned with its Guiding Ideas.

I have seen organizations agree on the rhetoric of their Guiding Ideas (e.g. "promote social and economic justice," "increase diversity") without developing a shared understanding of what those words mean, why they are important, and what needs to happen in order to create desired changes. The rhetoric may help individuals and teams to stay busy and even feel useful. But rhetoric without shared understanding often leads to disharmony at the Organizational Layer, as programs are not strategically aligned, at the Team Layer as staff frustration can cause covert and overt conflict, and in the ecosystem as a whole, as it fails to move toward the impact it seeks.

Over the years, I have seen many examples of how clarifying Guiding Ideas can have a powerful ripple effect throughout the whole ecosystem. Several years ago, the new executive director of an organization called me. She was

beyond distressed: staff were unhappy, morale was low and the work of the organization was suffering. She believed the organization had a Team Layer disharmony rooted in interpersonal conflict, and she wanted me to help the team build their capacity to work together. Talking with her and other team members, I learned that the organization had experienced significant "mission drift" in recent years. Staff were passionate about the work of the organization, but they didn't know what their jobs entailed or why. They were frustrated, and a few key staff had already left the organization. The board was equally confused. Tensions were high and trust frayed. But the root of their difficulties turned out not to be interpersonal relationships or even team dynamics. Rather, it was widespread confusion and absence of shared agreement about the purpose and priorities of the organization.

The organization embarked on an inclusive process to identify its Guiding Ideas—values, mission, purpose. The board and staff were excited and energized by a retreat at which they came to agreement on these elements. They then committed time to developing a shared understanding of what their words really meant for individuals, the community of board and staff, and the work of the organization. Intense, sometimes heated conversations ensued. While this work was difficult, it freed up a lot of energy by surfacing covert tensions that had not been given voice and had led to interpersonal conflict and frustration. A small number of board members left the organization because they didn't support its new direction. Remaining board and staff were able to talk honestly and question each other's assumptions. They identified clear organizational goals and priorities and aligned staff roles. The impact of these efforts became visible in the community they served. None of this could have happened without the organizational leadership and Personal Leadership of the Executive Director, but the work she led focused on the Organizational Level. More than ten years later, this organization continues to thrive and achieve widely celebrated impacts.

Clear Guiding Ideas are ineffectual without commensurate resources, capacities and action plans, which are also part of the Organizational Layer. The elements that need to align for harmony at the Organizational Layer include organizational structure (who is accountable to whom and for what),

financial management (where does money come from and where does it go), physical infrastructure (space and technology), and human resource policies and support mechanisms (including, benefits, grievance policies, job descriptions and performance evaluation tools). Systems for support and accountability are generally set at the Organizational Layer and put into practice at the Team Layer.

Sometimes organizations committed to social justice have policies that contradict their values and aspirations. I once worked in an organization with a mission to support the health and well-being of children and families that offered no parental leave for employees. This gap in practice, along with many others, contributed to lack of loyalty among employees, which in turn visibly translated into reduced performance. Employees felt little incentive to bring their best to their work within an organization that they felt didn't have the integrity to "walk its talk." This disharmony at the Organizational Layer strongly impacted the Individual and Team Layers.

Both the individuals who comprise the organization and, to a great degree, the wider Societal Layer shape the Organizational Layer. Individuals collectively create and maintain the culture of the organization, an endeavor that inevitably reflects the impact of values and norms from the Societal Layer. The Societal Layer creates the context within which the organization operates, including the societal need it exists to address.

When leaders face disharmony in the Organizational Layer, it can be tempting to look only at factors that seem manageable—like creating a new program or organizing a training to build staff capacity—rather than addressing the replication of Societal Layer factors within the organization. For example, I have seen organizations with staff and clients who are primarily poor people of color governed almost entirely by relatively privileged white people. When an organization designs policies and structures without including the critical, lived perspectives of people who know intimately the realities and challenges of the community, its solutions seldom achieve sustained positive change. Governance and leadership that does not embody the voices of those served can recreate the very dynamics the organization seeks to change.

Shifting power at the Organizational Layer is difficult. It requires vulnerability, honesty, courage and a true willingness to change how power and leadership operate at the Organizational Layer.

The Team, Organizational and Societal Layers all have cultures. Organizational Layer culture emerges over time. Highly influenced by historical factors both within and outside of the organization, it can feel intractable and permanent. Organizational culture can include things like whether people are formal or friendly with each other, how much time people are expected to spend at work and which behaviors are rewarded or discouraged, both overtly and subtly. I have seen organizations and teams undergo complete turnovers and still maintain existing cultures and norms, some of which support excellence and some of which don't. At one organization, despite near 100% staff and board turnover over time, historical tensions between the board and staff persisted as if there had been no changes in personnel.

Shifting power at the Organizational Layer is difficult. It requires vulnerability, honesty, courage and a true willingness to change how power and leadership operate at the Organizational Layer.

I am always inspired when organizations committed to social justice do the hard work of living their values and aspirations in their working practices. This can happen in many ways: supporting the leadership of women and people of color; rigorously building capacity for authentic, honest communication; and prioritizing resources toward things they believe in, even when not doing so might produce gains.

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS

When diagnosing the roots of a disharmony at the Organizational Layer, it is important to do an organizational assessment informed by leadership and staff at all levels. Some of the questions that can guide this assessment include:

- Do staff have a clear shared sense of the purpose of this organization?
- What are the primary goals of the organization? How were these determined? How are they evaluated? How are programs and operations aligned with larger goals?
- What are the values of this organization? How do these values manifest in daily operations? Are these values shared widely within the organization? Are they taken seriously?
- What is the organizational structure? Are the appropriate processes and people in the right places to accomplish organizational goals? Are the lines of accountability clear?
- How are resources managed? Does resource allocation match the organization's espoused goals?
- How are decisions made? Are the people affected by decisions able to contribute their wisdom and insights?
- What words would people use to describe the organizational culture?
- What types of behaviors does this organization value most? How does it reward these behaviors?
- What mechanisms are in place to assure accountability? How is good performance rewarded and poor performance addressed?
- How does the organization promote and reward learning, innovation and continual growth and improvement?

SOME POSSIBLE ORGANIZATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

As with the other layers, Organizational Layer interventions require careful consideration of what a specific organization needs at a specific time, including whether interventions at other layers are also needed.

Because Organizational Layer interventions take place at a broader level, they tend to be more complex and have more moving parts. Since they can involve multiple and larger constituencies, these interventions should pay careful attention to creating alignment within the organization. Interventions that create rhetoric without actual buy-in and support will not have the power to

create transformational change that leads to increased impact. Without shared understanding and enthusiasm for implementation and follow through, they will not foster real health at the Organizational Layer.

Some possible Organizational Layer interventions include:

- *Clarify "Guiding Ideas."* Mission, purpose, vision and values are the fundamental concepts of an organization from which all else follows. An inclusive process for clarifying these ideas can build trust and buy-in throughout the organization. The absence of alignment around these ideas can have enormous costs for organizational efficacy and morale.
- *Strategic planning.* An inclusive and dynamic process for intentionally designing the organization's destination and path can build trust, buy-in and a clear direction for the future.
- *Clarify HR practices and policies.* Aligning practices and policies with organizational aspirations strengthens the container within which staff do their work and builds trust in the organization.
- *Governance development.* Intentionally building the capacity of the board to provide guidance and support is essential for organizational health. Aspects of governance development include roles, responsibilities, structure, ways of meeting and communicating, accountability and skill building. The most important aspect is recruiting, on-boarding and retaining board members who can contribute significantly to the health of the organization.
- *Assessment and realignment of organizational structure and resources.* When structure and resources match aspirations, with sufficient resources to accomplish goals wisely allocated, work can be accomplished more effectively.
- *Build leadership throughout the organization.* Help people throughout the system take on deeper levels of ownership and responsibility for the success of the whole. This can be done through leadership development training, mentoring, and including all levels of the organization in Organizational Layer decision making.

THE
SOCIETAL LAYER
OF THE ECOSYSTEM

The Societal Layer of the ecosystem is different from the other layers because it is structurally outside the organization. I think of this layer as a force field created by history and kept in place by the collective energy of individuals and institutions. It is a ring of influence that contextualizes the rest of the ecosystem, but it is also the layer that the rest of the ecosystem exists to address.

The Societal Layer is vast and multi-faceted. It is all of our collective beliefs and stories, which can feel like solid truth, whether or not they actually are. Our laws, our values, our history. The ways in which we oppress each other based on our identities. Our social norms and mores. The ways in which we allow for allocations of resources that create disparity. The ways in which we educate our young, care for our sick, bury our dead. The issues our organizations exist to address are rooted in the Societal Layer, as are the contexts within which our organizations operate: access to funding, status and acknowledgement of our work, threats of violence.

Organizations that are explicitly working to impact societal factors need to be especially mindful of how those factors and the values of mainstream society live in their culture, practices and interpersonal relationships. They need to be awake to the influences and effects of the Societal Layer so they can work to heal—not recreate—oppressive beliefs and behaviors within the organization. Recognizing and challenging societal influences on our ways of working and being together shifts the force field that holds the Societal Layer in place, and ultimately creates more justice in the world.

At the same time, the toxic influences of our societal context are inescapable, and we cannot act completely outside them. Racism, classism, sexism and other forms of oppression are so much a part of our daily lives that many people, particularly those of dominant identities, often fail to notice their effect in defining interactions and relationships. We need to be mindful of how we are being influenced so we can see when we are recreating oppressive dynamics and can compassionately work to restore trust when there has been a violation.

It is also important to notice what happens when the values of the wider society contradict the organization's values. An example of this is a fair trade organization I worked with that seeks to create equitable trading relationships between producers in poor countries and consumers in wealthier ones. Yet they exist in a wider societal context that measures business success solely on the amount of money earned. This organization finds themselves continually caught between choices that could enhance their own business or those that would benefit their producer partners. The organization has to lean on the clarity of their Guiding Ideas (Organizational Layer) and the high Personal Leadership of staff (Individual Layer), as well as high trust within their organization and with their producer partners (Team Layer), to live within that contradiction and operate in a manner consistent with their values and aspirations.

As organizations, teams and individuals, we must understand how Societal Layer influences play out in our organizations and within ourselves so that we can make the choice not to collude with the impulse for oppression, but to act in the interests of love.

Our human impulse to other and oppress each other is strong. Yet so is our impulse for love. As organizations, teams and individuals, we must understand how Societal Layer influences play out in our organizations and within ourselves so that we can make the choice not to collude with the impulse for oppression, but to act in the interests of love.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Some Signs that Organizations are Mindful of Influences from the Societal Layer

- Resource allocation aligns with organizational values and priorities.
- Organizational decision-making processes attend to the ways in which oppression and "isms" may influence individuals and teams and, as much as possible, operate outside of those constructs.
- Individuals in the organization explicitly and openly discuss the impact of Societal Layer influences in relationships and work processes. They welcome these conversations, rather than fearing them.
- Relationships with funders are honest, transparent and based on shared values. Programming is not developed primarily to attract funding, but is fully aligned with the impact the organization seeks to have in the world.
- Strategies are designed with full awareness of the external forces influencing the organization and its industry.

Some Signs Organizations May Not be Mindful of Influences from the Societal Layer

- People of non-dominant identities do not feel safe and/or do not fully and authentically participate in the organization's work.
- People with dominant identities occupy a majority of the positions of power.
- There are no norms for talking explicitly about difference.
- Observable cultural artifacts (e.g., music played in the office, pictures on display, etc.) reflect the dominant culture.
- "Extracurricular" activities take place within the context of the dominant culture and may be inaccessible to people with non-dominant identities (e.g., wilderness excursions, benefit events with a high ticket cost).

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS

These questions are designed to guide an inquiry into how societal factors, particularly issues related to identity, are influencing practices at the Organizational or Team Levels. They should be asked only when the leadership of an organization is prepared to truly listen and make changes based on what the assessment may reveal. Ideally, an assessment is conducted by someone external to the organization who can compassionately hear and reflect the organization's issues so they can be addressed.

- Do staff feel valued and affirmed in their identities?
- Do people name and discuss difference, including race, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical abilities?
- What are the identities of the people in positions of institutional authority? Do the identities of people in formal leadership positions reflect the community that is served by the organization?
- What is done to actively promote and support the leadership of women and people of color?
- Do organizational policies and benefits include and protect people who identify as LGBT?
- Does the physical space work well for people with disabilities?
- How are organizational events and celebrations mindful of diverse needs and cultures?
- Are the experiences and needs of people outside of dominant identities and traditionally marginalized communities (e.g., LGBT, people of color, immigrants) considered and incorporated into program work?
- What other external factors might be impacting the organization? Is there a shared understanding within the organization about what these factors are and how they might impact the work of the organization?
- How are larger societal factors addressed in the organization's strategic directions and considered in its ongoing strategic thinking?
- Does the organizational budget reflect a commitment to addressing these issues?

SOME POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS

Organizations, teams and individuals need to develop their own capacities to be mindful of influences from the Societal Level. It is notoriously difficult to influence and shift the Societal Layer. Individuals and organizations committed to social justice have taken on the most difficult, and the most important, of tasks. Living with harmony at the other three layers of the ecosystem ripples out and ultimately shifts the Societal Layer. These are some ways to build capacity to be mindful of Societal Layer influences.

At the Individual and Team Layers, these include:
- *Training on diversity and inclusion.* This can help individuals build awareness and skills for relationships and collaboration across difference, including understanding unconscious biases and tools for not acting on them.
- *Facilitated conversations.* With skilled facilitation paying careful attention to creating trust and a safe environment for people of non-dominant identities, teams can talk about how identity and diversity are held and honored within their team. They can build agreements about how they can work to not collude with typical patterns of racism and sexism.
- *Affinity groups.* In order to deepen understanding across different identities, it can be helpful to have spaces for people who share identities to gather. This helps create a level of safety and belonging for people with non-dominant identities. It can also be helpful for people of dominant identities (e.g., men, white people) to have spaces for deepening their understandings of their own identities and systemic oppression so they can be in relationships across difference that do not recreate oppressive dynamics.

At the Organizational Layer, they include:
- *Address organizational culture:* Align organizational culture to support and affirm people from diverse backgrounds. This includes formal and informal aspects of culture: events and celebrations, office environments, times and ways of meeting, etc.

- *Address the clash of organizational values with societal values.* This requires a willingness to look at organizational practices relative to the espoused values of the organization. It depends upon leaders with strong Personal Leadership who are willing to change how they do things.
- *Revise HR practices to support diversity and inclusion.* This includes recruitment and hiring practices as well as benefits.
- *Shift structures for power and decision-making.* Create structures and processes that have wider involvement and shared power in real decision-making.
- *Sustain Organizational Commitment.* If an organization is working on societal change, it will come up against societal norms and pressure to conform, including economic pressures. Organizations need to continually reaffirm their commitment to work that seeks to shift societal norms. This requires ongoing authentic conversations about the contradictions and tensions the organization faces, so that it can mindfully and intentionally choose its actions.

CONCLUSION

Acupuncturists think about disharmonies having both roots and branches, what we might also call manifestations and deeper causes of disease. For example, if you have a fever, you may take ibuprofen or Tylenol to bring it down. The fever itself, however, is likely only a branch, a manifestation of a deeper disharmony, perhaps a virus that was able to take root because your immune system was weakened. To truly restore health, it is necessary not only to reduce the fever, but also to boost the immune system.

When we view organizations holistically, as interdependent ecosystems in which the flow of living energy in and through the entire system either promotes health or disharmony, we have a powerful metaphor for diagnosing and treating organizational challenges, as well as creating and maintaining health. In this way, we are empowered to not only treat surface systems, but also root causes as we seek to build healthy and powerful organizations that can work to create a more just and sustainable world.

NOTES

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