THE ECOLOGICAL ORGANISATION: A NEW PERSPECTIVE

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THE NATURE OF ECOLOGICAL THINKING

Organisations are 'ecological' both in an analogical sense and in reality. Ecology is the study of organisms living together in an environment in which they interact to form a self-regulating and self-organising system. Fritjof Capra (1982) links this idea to economic systems: 'The economy is a living system composed of human beings and social organisations in continual interaction with one another and with the surrounding eco-systems on which our lives depend.'

In this model each element, individual or organisation, is a sub-system 'linked through a complex web of interdependencies' (*ibid.*) within a greater whole. Human organisations function as self-conscious organisms within the global eco-system. This characteristic of self-consciousness has given human systems the power to dominate the eco-system, and can override the natural (unconscious) checks and balances in self-regulating natural systems. Co-operation and competition are natural behaviours in self-regulating systems. If human systems are to be viable, however, the modes of co-operation and competition need to be consciously chosen to reflect the ecological need for wholeness and interdependence. The spiritual qualities of love, honesty, truth and integrity have to be incorporated consciously into our organisational behaviour – making true 'ecological organisations' – to regain viable and sustainable economic systems.

THE DEEPER PURPOSES OF BUSINESS

To be ecological, a business needs to define deeper purposes than its profit and growth. To achieve a meaningful and sustainable existence within the global eco-system, all organisations need purposes defined to serve real needs in society and environment. If the idea of intrinsic value were to underpin financial value, profit could be optimised (as opposed to maximised) to provide the means for fulfilling the real social and ecological purposes of business. The idea of 'intrinsic value' has been increasingly lost to industrialised society (see for example Seattle, 1854; and Williams, 1990).

The term 'business' derives from 'the act of being busy'. It has come to mean an activity directed at the maximisation of profit and growth, an idea which

dominates modern management education. The corresponding imperative in the public sector is the minimisation of expenditure. This outlook mistakes the means for the ends of human activity. It loses the vital ideas of wholeness and interdependence, and thus leads to the global environmental and social crises arising from human activity.

THE ECOLOGICAL ORGANISATION

Each organisation has an inner life and an outer life, which are constantly adjusting and responding to each other. The inner life is the collective life of all the individuals working within the organisation, and the outer life is the organisation's social and environmental relationships. The balance within this complex web of interdependencies is at the root of the wholeness and health of the individual, of society, and of the global ecology. Taking action to solve global problems while ignoring their connections with the inner life of organisations and the individuals within them, can only create more problems of the same kind.

Business leaders are recognising the significance of the inner and outer dimensions of business:

> Increasingly companies will only survive if they meet the needs of the individuals who serve in them; not just the question of payment, important as this may be, but people's true inner needs, which they may even be reluctant to express to themselves. (Sir John Harvey-Jones, 1987)

> In the last few years there has been a strong swing behind the whole philosophy of corporate social responsibility. Attitudes in the private sector have changed from rather dismissive detachment to an acknowledgement of constructive self-interest. (Sir Hector Laing, 1988)

This recognition is showing in the development of policies which address the impact of business activities internally and externally. Examples in action include 'Environmental Audits', 'Community Relations Policies', 'Total Quality Management', 'Strategic Human Resource Management' and 'Business Ethics'. They are a very significant development. However, by themselves they are insufficient if treated as discrete tools for particular policies. Business needs to recognise the interrelatedness between the inner and the outer, and their integration to create the true ecological organisation (Kinsman, 1990; Conn, 1988).

ECOLOGICAL ORGANISATION INVENTORY

Management must develop the skills of seeing the whole picture of business as an integrated interactive process. The 'Ecological Organisation Inventory' (summarised in Table 1) is a simple, adaptable framework to help develop this awareness of wholeness in analysis, policy formulation, decision-making or any other management task. It provides a basic tool for scanning an organisation as an holistic system from a number of perspectives, both analytically (in the usual

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Ecological Organisation Inventory – Summary
In which of these areas does the organisation show signs of developing or practising policies and programmes which reflect ecological values of wholeness and interdependence?

A   THE ORGANISATION'S INNER LIFE

   (i)   *Whole Persons*
         ■ conscious personal development
         ■ balanced personal and work lives
         ■ alignment of individual and organisational purposes

   (ii) *Empowering Processes*
         ■ personal development programmes
         ■ vision building/strategic planning
         ■ organisational culture
         ■ organisational energy flows
         ■ physical environment

B   THE ORGANISATION'S OUTER LIFE

   (i)   *Social Consciousness*
         ■ owners/shareholders/financial interests
         ■ traders: suppliers, distributors, competitors
         ■ customers/clients
         ■ public/community
         ■ institutions and other organisations
         ■ international groups

   (ii) *Planetary Interdependence*
         ■ effect on living species
         ■ use of the Earth's materials
         ■ effect on the environment

C   INTEGRATION OF THE INNER AND OUTER LIVES OF THE ORGANISATION

   (i)   *Ecological Organisation*
         ■ awareness of deeper purposes
         ■ appropriate product or service

TABLE 1   ECOLOGICAL ORGANISATION INVENTORY

management style) and intuitively (using visualisation and other imaginative processes). The following paragraphs indicate some of the issues which need to be considered under each heading in the Inventory. These can be developed and applied in depth and detail, according to the needs of the organisation concerned. It is a process for developing a different and 'whole' way of seeing the organisation, and is indicative and not exhaustive.

A THE ORGANISATION'S INNER LIFE

(i) Whole Persons

The individuals in the organisation are, in a sense, like basic atoms which form the organisation. Thus the organisation's state of being will reflect the wholeness of the individual persons, and their health in body, mind and spirit. How far they are aware of their own inner lives and the way they relate to the organisational life will determine the degree to which the organisation will move from being a disassociated and unintegrated collection of persons to one which is ecologically whole – an aware and sensitive organisation. Points to consider include:

■ *Conscious personal development.* Is there interest in developing awareness of an inner life (body, mind and spirit) and its relation to the outer life? This is personal development, the inner or spiritual journey, and essential in some form for a personal healthy inner ecology.

■ *Balanced personal and work lives.* Do the individuals recognise and try to practise a satisfactory balance between personal and work activities?

■ *Alignment of individual and organisational purposes.* Do the individuals want an alignment between their own inner journey and that of the organisation?

(ii) Empowering Processes

The organisation must provide a setting in which the individuals in it can nurture themselves and develop empowering, co-operative and creative relationships with each other, building true 'communities' (Scott Peck, 1988). This relates to the whole area of internal organisational management and development. Organisational policies need to acknowledge and reflect their interrelationships. The main areas to examine include:

■ *Personal development programmes.* Is there a successful and sustainable programme for individuals which includes provision for self-development and awareness, as well as for the acquisition of work-related skills? Does it include as an integral part of this the opportunity for each individual to develop awareness of personal purpose and vision in life as a whole, and relevant action plans?

■ *Vision building/strategic planning.* Is the process involved in clarifying and defining the organisation's purpose and vision linked with that provided for the individuals themselves, so that the two processes are interactive and complementary? Is the creative power of the individual encouraged? Is the collective purpose aligned with those of the individuals?

■ *Organisational culture.* Does this create the setting in which the organisation is enabling and facilitating for the individuals in it, and for the fulfilment of its own vision and purpose? Do the qualities of ecological wholeness prevail,

for example, in the distribution of power, reward policies, decision-making processes, the use of technology, the handling of information and communication, management style, leadership and group dynamics?

■ *Organisational energy flows.* Are there blockages of energy flow hindering the creative collaboration within the organisation? Can they be identified and eased?

■ *Physical environment.* Do buildings, furnishings, equipment, and the local environment enhance or hinder the functioning of human beings? Is their design ecologically sound, reflecting the natural interaction of human beings and the physical world?

B THE ORGANISATION'S OUTER LIFE

(i) Social Consciousness

The organisation needs to become conscious of the mutuality of its social relationships with individuals outside, and with other groups and organisations. They need to embody the qualities necessary for sustainable interdependence in both co-operation and competition, contributing to the development of a conscious society. The main relationships to look at are:

■ *Owners/shareholders/financial interests.* Do these encourage ecological wholeness? Are they positive and participative, founded on genuine mutual interests in the purpose of the organisation?

■ *Traders: suppliers/distributors/competitors.* Are the organisation's relations with other traders characterised by honesty, integrity, wise use of power, honouring of contracts in spirit as well as by the letter? Is competition regulated by awareness of the need for survival and mutual interdependence?

■ *Customers/clients.* Is the customer or client, whether an individual or another organisation, respected and viewed holistically, and treated with respect and dignity? Are services honest and effective, products life enhancing, and marketing and advertising responsible?

■ *Public/community.* Are there positive policies for relations with communities directly affected by the organisation, and for disclosure of information?

■ *Institutions and other organisations.* Do the same principles apply to relationships with governments, voluntary agencies, and others?

■ *International groups.* If there is an international dimension to the organisation's activity, are the principles outlined above applied with special reference to a responsible attitude to the ecology of other cultures?

(ii) Planetary Interdependence

The Gaia hypothesis of the Earth as a living organism (Lovelock, 1987) supports the idea of seeing organisations as organisms within the Earth's living system.

For them to continue simply as exploiters and controllers of the Earth's resources is not ecologically sustainable. The organisation's relations with the planet must reflect the interdependence of everything, the global ecology. The key areas to address are:

■ *Effect on living species.* Does this include the use of species as a material resource in production, and if so, what is the effect of operations on them and their environment? Do processes enhance the well-being of living species, or at least have a neutral effect?

■ *Use of the Earth's materials.* Are substitutes for non-renewable materials found and conservation practised? Are renewable materials ecologically managed? Are recycling and energy conservation practised, and wasteful production processes and excessive packaging avoided? Does design avoid building-in obsolescence and making repair and maintenance impossible or costly?

■ *Effect on the environment.* Do processes sustain the environment, and avoid pollution and dereliction? Does development enhance the environment?

C INTEGRATION OF THE INNER AND OUTER LIVES OF THE ORGANISATION

(i) Ecological Organisation

This Inventory of organisational policies and practices is concerned with internal and external relationships. It provides a natural insight into the ways in which the inner and outer dimensions interrelate. The key to successful integration of the inner and outer lives is the clarification of the organisation's real meaning and purpose. In many cases this will require organisations to look more deeply than they have hitherto. This is not something that can be done overnight; it must be a gradual process of change, transforming the organisation into one of true service. When such a process functions effectively, the output, whether product or service, is more likely to be socially beneficial and ecologically sound. The following points can be considered in summarising the Inventory:

■ *Awareness of deeper purposes.* What service is the organisation performing for the good of the greater whole? What real need is it meeting, or could it be meeting? How does that relate to the actual products? What needs to be done to deepen the collective awareness of ecologically sustainable purpose?

■ *Appropriate product or service.* Is the product or service socially useful and ecologically sustainable? What action has to be taken to develop and maintain progress towards this goal?

CONCLUSION
The model outlined in this Article can be the basis for a fundamental shift in the way we perceive organisations. Such a shift is essential if we are to find a way

of organisational life which is ecologically sustainable and humane. In human ecology, ethical behaviour is that which reflects wholeness and interdependence and thus supports sustainability, and helps organisations to move towards such a goal. Seeing organisations as 'ecological' themselves creates a new value system for the market mechanism so that eco-sustainability is reinforced and eco-suicide avoided.

The Ecological Organisation Inventory is a diagnostic tool to assist the shift in perception needed in a wide variety of management tasks. Our consultancy uses it at varying depths of analysis or detail. Follow-up work can be supported by internal and external specialists in the many areas covered by it.

Organisations have spiritual qualities as well as mechanical ways of working, and new ways of 'seeing' organisations are needed to incorporate this spiritual dimension. The spiritual qualities determine the qualitative impact of the organisation on the environment and the wider social community, as well as the quality of the inner experience for those directly involved within it. In periods of rapid change, organisations which are in tune with these spiritual qualities will be most successful in adapting to the unexpected.

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