

Chapter 15. A Model of Community Culture An Organizational Diagnosis in a New Age Community

In 1987, Celest Powell and I were invited to present at a conference at Findhorn called, "From Organization to Organism." We were also invited to stay after the conference to conduct an "organizational diagnosis" of the Findhorn community, and to present our findings to the whole community. That experience was my next window into the organizational world of intentional communities. In conducting our diagnosis, we interviewed representative members of all or almost all of the groups involved in Findhorn: long and short term members and guests; those in current or past leadership roles, including Eileen Caddy, one of the founders, and so on. We took voluminous notes on what our informants told us, and then went off to integrate them into a coherent presentation to the community.

During the conference we had presented our initial version of the organization culture model given in this volume in the paper, "Culture and Levels of Consciousness in Organizations." We expected we would be able to fit our Findhorn data to that model, but the data stubbornly refused to cooperate. I felt we were trying to fit Cinderella's slipper to the foot of one of her sisters—there was always some important part of what we had learned that was left over.

We were due to present to the community after dinner, and at four o'clock in the afternoon we still did not have a coherent model to give them. What to do, in the short time remaining? We could force fit our data to the model we had, which was incongruent with my sense of my own professional artistry, though it might have satisfied our audience. We could continue to search for an alternate model, but performance anxiety was beginning to impair our creativity.

Working with the Angel of Findhorn

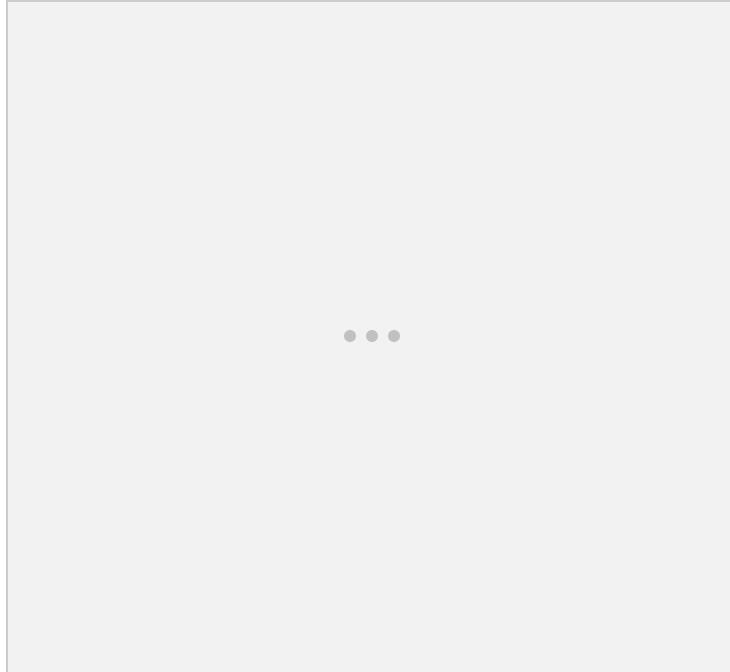
Findhorn is a place full of New Age mystique, in which communion with angels (devas) and nature spirits is commonplace. Although I did not at that time see myself as a person who could participate in such communication, I was desperate for help, and I suggested we go over to the meditation Sanctuary to see if any guidance was to be found. Once there, I lay on the floor under the center of the dome and invited the Angel of Findhorn to give me a model which would illuminate our data for the benefit of the community. Within a few minutes a new model came into my mind which fit our data. We hurried off and spent the dinner hour putting our presentation onto charts, and were ready just in time for the meeting.

The presentation itself was a little anticlimactic. Our audience was polite and interested, and they confirmed that we had caught the conflicting forces within their community within our model. There was a brief discussion following our presentation, and that was that.

The Model

The model has served me well since then in working with other intentional communities. I wrote it up originally in 1988, and I have modified it slightly from the original (see Figure 15.1.), adding *Power* to the issues included within the model, and changing the definitions of the elements slightly. The communities I work with recognize themselves within the model, and it has served well as a way of opening frank and open discussions about community issues and dynamics.

Figure 15.1. A Model of Community Culture



The four forces around the center of the diagram exist in any organization. Each tends to be *centrifugal*, in that they pull in different directions. They are thus divisive in their effect on the organization or group. I define each below.

Alignment: refers to the workings of *purpose* in the group. A group is aligned, when there is a strong sense of mission, common goals and values to which the members are committed. An aligned group asks a lot of its members, and the members respond by giving freely of their time and energy, because they believe in the work the group is doing. They work long hours, sacrifice personal and social needs, and identify so strongly with the group that it does not feel like a sacrifice. Aligned groups tend to be workaholic, high energy, and cooperative on the inside. They tend to be competitive on the outside, tolerant of disagreement about means, but intolerant of dissent about ends.

Relationship refers to the workings of *love* or *heart* in the group. A group is in relationship, when the members have strong feelings of caring and connection with one another, when being together is just as important or more important than the task or work they do. Attuned groups enjoy being together. They willingly spend time and energy making sure that people are included and comfortable. They like to find consensus. They work to heal hurt feelings and damaged relationships. They spend a lot of time together, whether working or playing, and they are always ready to celebrate. Relationship oriented groups tend to be caring, close and open with their feelings. They are more than ordinarily aware of their *connections*, internally and often with the wider environment as well. They may have difficulty surfacing conflict, and they are so committed to everyone feeling all right about decisions that they may have difficulty getting on with work.

Individualism refers to the workings of *self* or *ego* in the group. A group is individualistic when people focus primarily on their own growth and on meeting their own needs. Members of individualistic groups are devoted to personal development as a dominant

value. Members will support one another in "doing their own thing," but they tend to compete for the resources the group has to offer: time, attention, love, influence. Individualistic groups tend to be exciting and creative, with a lot of energy, but their energy may go off in all directions, and there are frequent conflicts over goals. People get along well when everyone is learning and growing and working on their own development, but they find it hard to get dull, boring tasks done. Everyone wants to join in the party, but no one wants to do the dishes or take out the garbage afterwards.

Power refers to the distribution of *influence* and access to *resources* in the group. The power orientation in a community is often expressed in competition for status, and the right to make decisions for others about what to do, and how to do it. Hierarchy, role differentiation, and rules for making decisions are ways groups deal with the power needs of their members. They are also ways groups organize to get things done. Power may be exercised in the service of getting the work done, or it may be sought to meet personal needs. Disentangling these two issues is one of the knotty problems in the management of the community's life. Issues of power and individualism are often intertwined, as some seek to control others, and the others seek space and autonomy to "do their own thing."

How the Four Forces Create Community Culture

These four forces are present in differing degrees in every group, and the balance among them creates much of the emotional climate or *culture* of the group. When a group is in a transition, the balance among these forces is disturbed, and people take sides around the values of each orientation. These conflicts are divisive, and many groups fall apart in trying to resolve them. Every community must find a balance among the forces, and find a way to hold itself together in the face of the tension. In business or government, the tension is managed by the application of power and structure: the control of monetary resources, and the power to make and enforce policies and procedures. In intentional communities, and in voluntary organizations, there has to be something more intangible which holds the whole together. Sometimes it is a common purpose, a passion for doing particular work in the world. Sometimes it is what I call *spirit*, the fifth force in the diagram.

Spirit is that sense of unity or oneness which is beyond individual purposes, emotional entanglements with one another, and even beyond the passion for doing good. In a community like Findhorn, spirit is experienced through meditating together, and through *attuning* to higher guidance. When people join together in asking to know what is for the highest good, and they open themselves to receiving that knowledge, they are invoking spirit. The guidance, when and if it comes, arrives as intuitive knowing, free from the influence of egoistic hopes and fears. Spirit, in a group which knows how to access it, can be a powerful unifying force against the opposing pull of the other four forces. I put it in the center of the diagram because, unlike the others, it is never divisive, but integrating and healing.

Using the Culture Model

This model is a explanation for trials and difficulties, but it does not immediately offer a cure. As long as we are human, have differing needs and values, and are not constrained by power from pursuing our differing visions, we shall have to struggle for whatever measure of harmony and community of purpose we achieve. Models such as this one are useful because they tell us what are the likely limitations and constraints on growth and development in groups and organizations. This particular model is useful in emphasizing the centrality of *Spirit* and the practice of attunement as a unifying force that overcomes the divisiveness of all the others.

Of course, any one of the other forces can assume the center. We can find *Relationship* oriented communities that are organized around friendship, putting harmony and good feeling above all else. We can find others where *Power* is the dominant force, where everything is subservient to the will of the dominant individual or coalition, who alone determines the priorities and balance among competing needs. Or *Alignment*, in the form of a common purpose may be the organizing principle, and all else, individual needs, relationships, and formal hierarchy bend to the power of a the mission and vision of the group. And of course, some *Individualistic groups* are always on the verge of falling apart, because the dominant principle is for everyone to do as they please.

Seeking Integration through Attuning to Spirit

Each of these forces, when dominant, suppresses important needs of individuals or the organization as a whole. In my view, the virtue concept of *Spirit* as unifying force is that it embraces all the others and holds them in balance for the good of the *whole*, meaning not only the whole organization, but the whole of everything, the highest good. When a community seeks to attune itself to the highest, and hold in its consciousness the good of the whole, then all the other forces and agendas at the group, interpersonal and individual levels are brought into relationship in service to the whole. They are not suppressed; they are balanced.

Of course this ideal of balance is difficult to attain in practice. It is unstable, and even when it has been attained, it must be worked at continuously. It is not a "soft" or easy ideal—it leads to frequent or even continuous conflict over what is the highest, and what constitutes the good of the whole. Even groups which have a central religious commitment may find their religion a barrier to the realization of *Spirit* in the sense of a process of continuous attunement to guidance. That is because we long for certainty and stability, and having found our version of Truth, we resist looking further. But Spirit, in the sense in which I hold it, is impatient of Final Truth, being continuously in flux and change. And it speaks to us from all of nature, not from any single authority. Guidance and truth are thus open to all, and the sources from which they may spring are as varied as the universe in which we live. A tree, a rock, a river, a bird, a flower, all may be messengers of Spirit. So also may the lowliest, the craziest, the newest, the most naive members of our community, as well as the most sophisticated and experienced, and the furthest along whatever Path we have chosen to follow as our spiritual or religious discipline.

Then how shall we know the true voices from among all the others that clamor to be heard, from inner as well as outer sources? Perhaps by becoming as still as we are able, and quieting the voices of ego and desire, acquired knowledge and experience, and our "mental models." Perhaps by listening with respect and compassion to the voices of our fellows, even, or especially, when they seem ignorant, foolish or "off the wall." Perhaps by holding our bias for action in check long enough to hear one another out in dialogue and reflection, and inquire deeply into the deeper mental structures that underlie our differences. Perhaps by prayer, asking for guidance in the faith that it will be given, and with a willingness to follow it into the unknown.

Obviously, I don't have any complete answer to how to achieve a consensual understanding in community of what the voice of Spirit is telling us in any particular situation. What I do know from experience is that the fruits of the willingness to listen deeply, to let go our own ideas, to follow guidance wherever it leads, are cumulative. I do not venture to hope that practice will make us perfect, but I know that it will make us continuously more whole.