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APPLIED SOCIOMETRY

ABSTRACT. Today, even more than when Moreno wrote "Who Shall Survive?", it is clear we need all the help we can get for our planet to survive. Thus the need for sociometry. Some applications of sociometry that have worked within organizational settings, both public and private are described in this article. Furthermore, sociometric applications that have not worked and the rationale behind them are illustrated. Future research and applications of sociometry are discussed.

"Whom you know is more important than what you know." And the quality of the know is as important as the whom you know.

SOCIOMETRY HAS A MULTITUDE OF applications and benefits to society, organizations, businesses, and individuals. For those of us who are consultants to organizations about training and planning, it is a precise auxiliary. The reason that it is not better used, better known, and appreciated is itself a sociometric problem. It has not been well linked to the psychodrama movement, by Moreno himself or by teachers or practitioners. So it is even less well linked to other academic disciplines dealing with organizational development and training. Also, sociometry is a powerful method. It makes reality visible, too much of which people cannot stand. Like a pneumatic drill, it is a robust tool. Such a robust tool requires time in which to learn to use it comfortably. However, if it were not robust, it would not be worth using. Has one ever heard of a good carpenter who sought only to use blunt saws because sharp ones could cause damage?

Organizational Sociometry at a Diamond Mining Company

Asked by a diamond mining company to assist in training managers, I was to address the management of performance, I had 1 day for the job--the second to last in a 5-day program. So the team was fairly well built--at least there was a workable amount of cohesion. The session was to be conducted at the mine site, amid vast spaces of red soil, gruff outcrops of hills, and acid green vegetation. Initially, I warmed the group up to building

on what was positive and healthy in their skill development. Because I knew it would be more productive to warm them up to roles they had experienced in their performance, I had them imagine three scenes.

The first was one in which they were being managed well and producing an excellent performance. After taking in the scene, its smells, colors, people, time, and so forth, I asked them to focus on what they were thinking or saying to themselves and to write this down. I asked them to do the same with what they were feeling and what they were doing. So we had in written form the elements of the role of excellent performer: the thinking, feeling, and actions. Second, we went to a scene where they were managing someone or others excellently. Again, after warming up to the scene they wrote about what they were thinking, feeling, and doing in that scene. Third, we went to a scene where they were not being managed well and wrote down the elements of the role of poorly managed person. The group then chose a member with whom to share the material from the three experiences. This helped reinforce their learning and their self-disclosure, which are needed for the next steps.

Then I taught a little about role theory, explaining the elements of a role, how roles developed, the roles and counter roles, and how human systems were networks of roles. We were going to become clearer on the roles a manager needs to manage performance.

After the participants shared what they had written, I wrote down what they said. I converted what they said into a role title. So, if someone said he or she was being well managed and was feeling excited, acting better than ever before and thinking, "I'm pushing beyond my limits," I wrote the role on the board as "excited limit breaker." We did that for all the roles gathered from the experiences of good and bad performance management.

Next, we gathered in groups of four to discuss and come to some agreement about the essential roles that promoted excellent performance and those that impeded it. We arrived at a list of roles the manager needs to stimulate excellent performance. I warmed the group up to an appreciation of what they had done and invited them to risk getting feedback from one another, based solely on the experiences of the week's training course. This would give them a picture of how they were seen and what roles they needed to develop to be a better manager. They agreed to listen to feedback.

For each of the roles, I set a sociometric choice exercise. If the role mentioned was "listener," I asked them to put their hand on the shoulder of the person they would choose to listen to them for 5 minutes. Hesitantly at first, but then with excitement, the group snaked and squirmed with the sociometric catharsis. I explained that this was but a momentary measure, a polaroid snapshot. I asked those not chosen or those unsure of why they were chosen to find out, either then and there or later, why they were or were not chosen. They then acted on the choice and listened for 5 minutes. For a further 5 minutes, they reversed roles and the listener was listened to.

We did this with each of the major roles of the manager of excellent performance that they had enumerated from their experience. To conclude, I had them work in mirror pairs. (A mirror pair is one in which both work on B's plan or issue concerns for half the time and half on A's issue, etc.) In these pairs, they consolidated what they had learned about the skills they had and developed a strategy to develop one or two more of the roles of manager.

When I evaluated the day's work, the evaluations were quite positive. In fact, that day's work stood out when the participants evaluated the whole week's work at the end of the course. Because of the success of the work described here, I was invited back to repeat such a session with another group of trainee managers.

Problems of Sociometric Repetition

Less successful was a repetition of this same exercise with a group of senior and middle managers from a construction company. I believe it did not work well for these reasons:

- The managers were mostly men from a very male, patriarchal industry.

- The roles enumerated were largely male roles, and so the women were not chosen on several criteria.

- This led the women to believe they were isolates or rejects rather than to see the role list as mostly "masculine."

- I should have included more roles, such as "empathetic person," "intuitive person," "gentle person." Had I done so, my guess is the women would have been chosen more often.

The exercise demonstrated, as a good diagnostic exercise should, the way women were seen in the organization and the unbalanced role system most managers expected. This view parallels perceptions in the Australian construction industry generally. Also, these managers were not as sophisticated, in terms of amount of training and development, as the mining managers. That experience shows how much more needs to be done and in what directions.

Furthermore, the construction company managers had to work with one another in a smaller company on a day-to-day basis. The results of the choices made them feel more vulnerable than the mining company managers who were pan of a larger group who came together only for training. Therefore, although there was more conflict and the exercise was described by one woman in the second group as "destructive," the diagnostic exercise had been useful. The test will be to see how well the group can work with what the exercise has shown about gender roles in the organization. I feel it is also significant and worth noting that the latter group has had more than the societal average of marriage and relationship breakups.

Some people distinguish between characteristically male and female interventions in groups. In masculine interventions, the director introduces a strong intervention and then deals with the, consequences. The feminine intervention stems more from the role of producer, creating space and holding the process so that the group can lay out more and more of its sociometry. Perhaps, in working with a predominantly male system, I used more masculine interventions instead of balancing them with the roles of the producer. Readers should review the writings of Charlotte Joko Beck (1989, p. 49).

Subgroup Formation Based on Roles and Skills

In the choice of subgroups within a planning group, sociometry offers a leader opportunities to heighten productivity. If one asks for volunteers to plan something or to be the implementation team after a plan has been formed, one often gets people choosing themselves for the role of controller or hard-working martyr. A little dose of sociometry can make a huge difference. I shall explain the processes and then the benefits.

Step 1

Ask the group what skills or qualities are needed to do the job, for example, planning the redesign of a head office. They will come up with roles like experienced head-office person, systems thinker, honest person, empowering person, person with a sense of humor.

Step 2

Ask them to choose, either on paper or by placing hands on shoulders, people from the group for each of the roles. Ask the group, "Whom would you choose to be on the planning team solely for the role of empowering person?" and so on, for the other roles. Again, explain that this is not a popularity poll. Ask people to continue to assess their choice or nonchoice after or as part of the exercise.

Step 3

The planning team emerges with people chosen on the basis of a variety of roles necessary for the job. Few people, in my experience, are chosen on the basis of all the criteria.

The advantage of this procedure is that it obviates a popularity poll. One chooses a team precisely on the basis of necessary roles or skills. Those chosen have a clear picture of why they were chosen. This consolidates their competence in the roles in which they will do the job. Finally, this process heightens the team's acceptance of what they produce and reduces the resistance to what has been planned.

Sociometric Neglect or Malfunction

Now for an example that did not work well. After a corporate strategic planning exercise, a federal industry group wanted to choose a team to implement the corporate plan throughout Australia. Knowing how Australian groups usually choose, I knew the choice was likely to follow the battle of the supremacy of states and be normed by the agony of distance. So I asked them to pause and consider a sociometric choice. They agreed. I taught them the theory and directed them through the practice. The team did a fairly good job at implementing the corporate plan. However, they were impeded to a significant degree by one state group. On reflection, I remembered that the representative from that state had excluded himself from any sociometric choice. He sat outside the group on his own--a self-isolate. In my keenness to get on with the work, I neglected to inquire or include him or to find out why he resisted the exercise. We neglect what is obvious at our own peril, either then or later.

Future Research and Applications of Sociometry

Now I would like to make some general observations about sociometry and its application to organizations.

Usually, managers and supervisors are chosen by the people who employ them. Moreover, they are chosen (employed) to deliver a management or supervisory service. What would happen if we reversed the process and asked work groups to choose their own managers and supervisors? Many people think this is a recipe for chaos. But, is it any worse than the current situation? If a company cannot sell its products, it goes out of business. Yet, if a manager manages badly, the staff still has to accept that person as manager. This is because of a choice by a senior person. The choice, based on some criterion or criteria unknown to the staff, is a decision enforced by direct power. If it were clear what services a manager is to deliver, the staff could choose managers or supervisors on a set of criteria based on those services. The services could be described in role terms, for example, "goal setter," "vision builder," and "team builder." Then, the functions of the role could be described--for example, goal setter takes goals from the leadership of the company and breaks these into tasks for different groups, setting goals for each task and outcomes that can be measured. The staff would choose on the basis of those criteria persons whom they believed could deliver the specific management services they would need to do their work.

This may seem revolutionary. One chief executive to whom I suggested this first smiled encouragingly at the idea and then frowned and said, "But what about my job?"

My other observation is that there is a multitude of applications of sociometry in the workplace. Sometimes a consultant makes a sociometric intervention; sometimes a consultant thinks like a sociometrist without sharing the sociometric thinking. Moreno (1954), in "Who Shall Survive," noticed the centrality of sociometric choice to our lives and even to our survival. Currently, major environmental issues have a sociometric underpinning, for example, on what criteria do poor families choose to have another child?

Sociometric Misapplications or Misuse

After visiting Russia last year, I became convinced that true communism never took place because there had always been an "in" group that was more equal--more included--than the rest and that had much more wealth and privilege. During periods of political upheaval and unrest, there is need for sociometric solutions to society's problems. Sociometrists, however, spend a lot of their time learning the method and applying it to psychodrama or to the training of psychodramatists. I would argue that, somehow, sociometry itself needs to be included to a greater degree in the mainstream of world thinking.

Sociometry of itself does not make anything happen. Its power is in making a map of what is happening. From this map, individuals or groups may choose to shift. However, its accuracy and power make it an important tool for strategic analysis of the internal or external environments of companies, nations, or even the globe. Leonardo da Vinci said that most genius was in observation. Sociometry assists us to observe and to empower others through those observations.

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