

THE UNRESOURCEFUL  
ORGANISATION :

The Persistence of 'Group Helplessness'  
in the Workplace

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## **Abstract**

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### **The Unresourceful Organisation – The Persistence of ‘Group Helplessness’ in the Workplace**

This dissertation is about how an organisation can get ‘stuck’ in an unresourceful state. It is based on research that focused on an organisation delivering important public services, including housing, education and public safety. The organisation’s clientele covers all groups in the local region including the most vulnerable and those most at risk. Underperformance by such an organisation is of great significance to those who rely on its services.

The main aim of the research was to explore the nature of the organisation’s apparent inability to escape this state.

The research comprised a single case study with 50 research interviews with people working in the organisation. On average, each interview lasted an hour. A feature of the methodology was an approach to interviewing most commonly used for therapeutic purposes in ‘neurolinguistic programming’; this approach enabled critical questioning within the interviews.

The research found that employees felt helpless to change the situation yet were able to maintain their self-esteem intact; moreover this state was being transferred to new employees. The main outcome of the research was the development of a model embodying a particular form of learned helplessness that is applicable to whole organisations. The model explains the persistence of ‘group-helplessness’ over time.

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(Georgie – nanna-noonoo's a Doctor now!)

With love to my mother, who is to be admired for her own achievements and her tenacious approach to life, and to my brothers for treating me with the usual levels of contempt, just so I didn't get above myself.

To my Father, who died too soon to see me finish this, and who would have been amazed and proud, but who no doubt would have made treated it all with delightful irreverence. I miss you loads, Dad.

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*'Last night I heard my mama singing a song..  
'Oooooe chirpee chirpee cheep cheep.....'*

(I'm sure I could've got them in somehow.....)

## Student Declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Signed



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Dated: 24 January 2005

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Chapter 1  
Interruption to normal service  
The background

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# Chapter 1

## Interruption to normal service

### The background

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***“We trained hard...but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into a team we would be reorganised. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganising, and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress, while producing confusion, inefficiency and demoralisation.”***

(Pretonius Arbitor, Roman Governor of Bithynia, AD50)

This first chapter serves as an introduction to the thesis. It offers a background to the study, an outline of the research questions and an overview of how the work has evolved and developed over time.

### **1.1 The background - three into one**

This study focuses on one local authority – a large unitary authority in England. As a result of Parliamentary/Statutory orders running parallel with the Local Government Act 1994, two former borough councils and parts of the county council were reorganised in 1997 to create the new unitary authority. This reorganisation brought together three distinct organisations, all of whom had their own histories, cultures and priorities.

At the time of local government reorganisation employees experienced high levels of uncertainty as their jobs were scrutinised and decisions were made about new staffing structures and organisational priorities.

Some individuals were automatically transferred into the new organisation by virtue of their roles and responsibilities (for example homeless persons officers, accountants, social workers, teachers) – this process was called ‘statutory transfer’. Other employees, many of whom held well paid positions in their previous organisations, would have to wait for the new organisational structures to be developed and would then have to compete for their posts. These people were termed ‘prior consideration’ – i.e. they would be automatically considered for all relevant posts in the new authority, and external applications would only be invited in exceptional circumstances. The three merging councils worked together to avoid compulsory redundancies, offered voluntary redundancy packages and, in the worst cases, employees joined the new authority in posts which held less status than their previous ones, but which were offered with protected salaries for a period of three years.

According to anecdotal evidence (there are few formal records or documents in existence which provide detailed information on each authority) the three organisations were very different. As part of the context for the study I offer my own perceptions as an employee of one of the three organisations, as well as quoting the views of an employee of each of the other two councils.

I spoke to an employee of the former county council who had this to say about the culture of his organisation prior to reorganisation:

*“We had been a hung council for some time – lib/lab but not a pact – so a bit leaderless. We were not articulating any vision at this time .....we were in the management doldrums – very little development activity. However the culture was changing from our chiefs and senior bosses being professional heads to ‘best’ managers. This was quite shocking for many. For example, the chief engineer became director of transport and environment ..... The head of library services was not a librarian, and the head of social services was a librarian! We were stable and traditional but worrying about our financial future. We were a*



*tasky, pragmatic culture – so reorganisation was just an issue of doing the business....”*

A former employee of one of the other two councils described her experiences thus:

*“The former borough had been conservative for some 120 years. In 1995 labour took control for the first time. Many long serving officers had got used to the tory way of working and found it hard to adapt, or were forced to adapt in some cases, to the new regime and shift to different ways of thinking. However the politicians saw this as a huge advantage as it meant the whole of the new unitary would be controlled by labour.*

*When I joined I was given a very warm welcome, it was probably the most friendly and helpful place I have ever worked in. People took a genuine pride in their work and wanted to provide a good service. We didn't like the idea of CCT and kept services in house, however the bins were always emptied on time! It felt traditional, old fashioned but safe.*

*The corporate management team consisted of the chief exec and 13 directors, all white male until I joined. At meetings this huge CMT worked extremely co-operatively. The total number of staff was only about 650, so very top heavy.*

*I carried out a culture dig. The results clearly flagged up a blame culture. Some of this seemed to stem from the emotional damage caused by a fire in a house in multiple occupation some years previously. Someone had died and the enquiries lasted years, casting a long shadow.*

*By the time I joined no training had taken place for some time. Training had stopped due to lack of funds. I was very concerned about this as I quickly realised my new colleagues would be at a serious disadvantage when applying*

*for jobs in the new authority. I tried to convince people this was a false economy and towards the end staff joined in training with the other Borough”.*

As for the third council (where I was originally employed) this council, in my view, had strong and distinct identity and was led by a reasonably popular, high profile chief executive. It was Labour controlled and was the most ‘dominant’ of the three councils. The council had a strong commitment to equalities, and provided a wide range of training and development opportunities for staff. However, this council was not without its problems. During 1995 staff were faced with the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering – CCT. This was a Conservative government initiative, abandoned in 1997 by the incoming Labour Government and replaced with the ‘best value’ initiative, which involved councils competing with private companies to provide key services, e.g. refuse collection. The introduction of CCT meant that staff were competing with one another for posts within the council, where a new ‘client side’ unit was established to manage work which had been contracted to external providers. It also meant that jobs and personal security were threatened. At the same time, John Gummer’s local government review set out the future for the structure of local government, and staff became aware that big change was on the horizon. Sickness absence levels had escalated during the period 1993 to 1995 – the figure for the council was the highest absence rate found in a survey conducted by an external consultancy, who collated absence figures from 31 organisations. The council acknowledged at the time that staff were experiencing high levels of stress and uncertainty. One of the issues at the time was the chief executive’s determination to achieve ‘investors in people’ status for the council – an award which staff knew would be invalidated as soon as the council merged with the other two. From my perspective levels of cynicism seemed to rise at this time as staff shared with one another the perception that the acquisition of investors in people status was something the chief executive wanted in order to strengthen his own position in advance of competing for the role of chief executive in the

new authority. At this stage, rightly or wrongly, staff were losing their trust in the organisation's leadership and their motivation.

My role in this council at the time of reorganisation was corporate training officer, and my main responsibility during the 6 months prior to reorganisation was the provision of training and development for all three authorities, specifically relating to the recruitment process into the new organisation. I offered training for job applicants as well as training for interview panels. Until approximately 9 months prior to reorganisation, motivation levels were *reasonable* within the organisation, although staff regularly expressed their cynicism about the motives of the leaders of the organisation, as well as their fears for the future. Many staff chose to focus on their roles and responsibilities and achieve their objectives, rather than involve themselves in bigger issues. This was possible until strategies and actions were introduced (such as HR reorganisation reports and training and briefing sessions) which highlighted the fact that big change was on the horizon. After this point staff at all levels (including me) began to experience high levels of uncertainty, self-doubt and a sense of loss. My own experience at this time was quite intense, since I was working with people as they prepared to apply for posts in the new authority. In my own organisation I witnessed tears, anger and resentment during training and coaching sessions, and as I began working with individuals from the other two councils the same levels of frustration were expressed, as well as the view that my council would 'take over' the new authority.

To a degree this perception could be believed to have been proved right – the chief executive from my council secured the post of chief executive to the new unitary authority very early on in the merger, and so the strong culture and identity he had created for the borough was likely to be carried into the new organisation.

The above observations are entirely subjective, and only one view has been presented for each of the three cases. They are just observations based on the knowledge and experiences of long-term workers in each of the merging authorities. Whilst being sketchy in terms of detail they provide an illustrative backdrop of perceptions against which I will discuss the outcomes of the reorganisation.

## **1.2 A false start**

After the lengthy and, for many, painful reorganisation process the new authority emerged. The results of the merger were, for some, highly satisfactory, in that their personal status (and salaries) were increased; there were now new opportunities to let go of old habits and to work in new ways, and the new organisation was large enough to make its mark nationally as well as locally. As outlined above, the three authorities differed in terms of morale and motivation prior to reorganisation. Cultures of blame, lack of vision and high levels of uncertainty seem to have already existed to greater or lesser degrees in all three organisations, and so the reorganisation brought with it, for many, a chance to work differently and forge new relationships. The first few months, whilst being sometimes chaotic through the lack of systems and agreed ways of working, also offered individuals the opportunity to think creatively without feeling constrained by existing 'rules' – formal and informal (these 'rules' will be explored in detail later in this thesis).

For others, the process had left them feeling disappointed, angry and de-valued. For those on protected salaries for a three year period, for example, their futures seemed unclear and their personal status had been diminished. These views were expressed by many at the time in induction workshops, management away-days and in corridors and offices. Others had lost friends and long term colleagues during the process and were feeling their way into the future whilst pining for the past. These feelings also were expressed at induction workshops,

on away-days and in informal settings, such as the staff canteen. In my role as part of the Organisational Development section I was in the unique position of coming into contact with large numbers of staff in the new authority, via training, consultation, one-to-one coaching and mentoring. (I will clarify my own role later in this chapter).

The perception existed that at senior levels in the organisation managers had done very well out of reorganisation, whilst at more junior levels individuals had lost personal if not professional status, had been, in some cases, provided with less than adequate accommodation and were being ignored in terms of their needs, views and potential contributions. This perception developed as a result of the appointment of a large senior management team comprising senior managers from all 3 authorities (but more particularly from my own labour-controlled council), who received salary rises to reflect an increase in their responsibilities, and who were very quickly accommodated in large and comfortable offices. Other staff were placed in overcrowded open-plan offices and many had lost status and had been denied the possibility of career advancement during the reorganisation process. Whilst many of the decisions made and actions taken were likely to have been perfectly justified, the lack of information coupled with a sense of disappointment amongst staff provided the ideal breeding ground for anger and resentment to grow and form part of the new culture.

At this point (i.e. from 1<sup>st</sup> April 1997, post local government reorganisation) my role was 'Management Development Policy Officer' with a brief to formulate a management development policy and plan for the new authority. I worked alongside the Corporate Training Manager, who was responsible for the formulation of a staff training policy and plan. Our roles kept us in contact with both managers and staff within the new organisation, as we entered into consultation processes to identify appropriate training and development interventions – both short-term and long-term. 126 managers (of a management

population of some 1,000), 204 members of staff (of some 4,000 excluding schools staff who were relatively untouched by the reorganisation process) and 14 union representatives took the opportunity to express their views and contribute their ideas in terms of management and staff development for the new authority.

Consultation days were offered where managers, staff and union representatives were asked to identify and prioritise their immediate needs, post reorganisation – in terms of resources, information and training and development. They were also asked to contribute views about the longer term training and development strategy for the new organisation by commenting on a set of draft proposals, contributing to the development of a vision for leadership and management in the new organisation and joining a management development working group to progress the work. It was during this consultation process that I became more aware of the differing levels of motivation and the high levels of anger, resentment and disappointment existing, attributed by staff and managers (at all levels) to the reorganisation process. This is not to say that I did not have some of those feelings myself, and these were as a result of my own experiences (more detailed information about my part in the system is given later in this thesis). What surprised me, however, was how 'acute' the problem seemed to be. I became aware that my own experiences and feelings were not unique, but that they seemed to exist throughout the organisation, to greater or lesser degrees, and regardless of position in the hierarchy or work context. It seemed unusual that so many people could be so unhappy.

At this point it seemed critical that we should introduce and implement a staff development policy and plan which would not only provide the necessary short-term skills and knowledge for individuals working in new areas, but which would provide long-term support for people and contribute to the development of a new culture. However, this was not to be. Having embarked on the consultation exercise; undertaken psychometric tests on some 200 managers against a set

of agreed management competencies; implemented a 360 degree assessment exercise and then used the results of these processes to formulate management and staff development policies and plans (which were agreed by the senior management team), the new authority re-structured again. Twice.

### **1.3 A fragile or unresourceful organisation**

My own role was finalised only after these two additional restructuring exercises within a period of three years - between 1997 (the 'birth' of the unitary authority) and 2000.

Much of the work I had undertaken within the first 6-12 months in the new authority was now out of date, and so management development had to be re-visited, from a new perspective – the perspective of my new manager. His view was very different from that of my previous manager, and my role took on a different emphasis. Such was the experience of many employees of the new authority, who, whilst being ready to begin or continue their work in the new organisation, were then subjected to further uncertainty and confusion as the senior management team sought to 're-shape' the new organisation (the terminology used at the time), as well as re-define the priorities for the new organisation. This was driven by a desire to address issues such as over-staffing in some areas, poor performance in others and the legacy of three different cultures, being played out in working practices and in the way relationships were developing. At these points staff appeared to lose motivation, spending a good deal of time discussing the future changes and expressing concern and anger.

During and after this period of restructuring the view was articulated, during consultation processes, by some senior managers that the new authority lacked a clearly communicated strategic direction for the organisation. Whilst espousing certain values the lack of cohesive political and managerial leadership meant

that behaviours did not reflect these values. In general these views were (and still are) supported by staff across the organisation – this is borne out by what is articulated in the research interviews, covered in detail in this thesis. They were also supported by external consultants, by members of other local authorities while undertaking a peer review and by partner organisations.

The authority was described as displaying ‘symptoms’ or ‘ailments’ by those who discussed it or who wrote reports about it. Staff were asked for their views as part of an external peer review process, and senior officers produced documents setting out the key areas where improvements were needed. The ‘symptoms’ were summarised by Bailey, in 2001, who was employed as a senior manager within the authority, holding overall responsibility for organisational development. As part of his own MBA studies into organisational development interventions Bailey listed the organisational ‘symptoms’ as follows:

- *we have broad (but rather elderly) priorities, are not strong on performance management, have a tendency to rush into projects without considering the value of their outcomes or the resourcing implications.*
- *we face significant challenges with shifting power over the forthcoming year. We are likely to have an elected mayor; a new cabinet style decision-making forum and possible changes to structures at the top officer level of the organisation. There is inevitably some jostling for position and ‘politicking’ at both political and officer level and a degree of game playing.*
- *There are perceptions that we have a bureaucratic ‘fat centre’ countered by views that the diversified “Directorates” have “gone off on their own” so far that the advantages of being one organisation may be lost. This, of course, depends on perspective but does on occasions mean that we fight lengthy resource battles or argue over the validity of outdated processes and can be slow to innovate.*



- *We have a poor information technology infrastructure and are not at present in a position to seize the opportunities that the e-revolution may offer to us.*
- *As regards our HR approaches our working practices, industrial relations, lack of flexibility, reward structure and workforce profile are not what they need to be. Increasingly new demands are made on our staff and we do not always meet the challenge of skilling them accordingly.*
- *Our financial systems are poor with heavy emphasis on 'managing within budget' rather than maximising value to customers from financial resources allocated.*
- *Our experience of working in partnership with others have not always been positive, well planned or strategically thought through. This has led to some poor outcomes which can hinder future innovation in partnership solutions.*
- *As a new labour 'flagship' authority sometimes the gloss of the PR is not always matched by the substance of service delivery.*
- *Even though we are a new organisation we still cling to many of the bureaucratic processes and procedures of our predecessor organisations and local government history. Whilst there is a legislative requirement so to do in some areas we find it difficult to move away from this. Our change capacity is poor and in the past some change activities have been ill conceived 'knee jerk' reactions seeking quick fixes to wrongly diagnosed problems'.*

A local government peer review was undertaken in March 2001, where a six-member team comprising senior officers and councillors from other local authorities in England met and interviewed a cross-section of elected members and staff within the council, plus representatives of partner organisations and the general public. (The Local Government Association and the Government promote peer reviews with the aim of encouraging high standards of achievement in all local authorities). The council was assessed against the

Improvement and Development Agency (I&DeA) Local Government Improvement Programme (LGIP) benchmark for the 'ideal' authority. The results of this review identified the following problems:

- a strong inward focus within the organisation
- a vision not fully understood by staff
- 'silo' mentality of departments
- incremental as opposed to step change
- focus on process and structure rather than outcomes
- poor service delivery undermining credibility
- lack of follow through
- lack of risk management
- time and effort wasted on detail
- lack of joined up consultation
- too many procedures, not enough action
- lost opportunities to engage with stakeholders
- transactional rather than transformational leadership
- poor project management

In short, the council was described as process driven, transactional, incremental, operating silo-working and providing poor services because of a predominantly inward focus. Discussions with colleagues seemed to indicate that this information did not come as a surprise to those who attended the presentation. Most of those who attended appeared to accept the findings with little, if any, resistance, merely expressing the desire for things to change for the better.

#### **1.4 Treating the symptoms**

At the time of beginning this study (2001) I was employed by the new unitary authority as an internal consultant responsible for leadership development and

organisational change (the result of the two restructures following the merger in 1997). My role at this time was broadly to:

- assist the organisation (or specific parts of it) to change and create a climate for open, honest and supportive working relationships (this is quite often called team building by organisations)
- create a culture of leadership and learning (usually described as introducing a leadership development plan and delivering training where appropriate)
- help the organisation (or part of it) to develop a shared vision and an agreed plan to implement it (change management)
- impact on the organisation's ability to think strategically, work flexibly and to achieve success via programmes of leadership and management development.

This work was against a backdrop of a massive programme of expected change as a result of a variety of internal and external drivers arising from Central Government's 'Modernisation' Agenda, increasing customer demand, changing technologies and reducing flexibility over financial resources. The clear messages within the organisation were that there was more change to come – not least the forthcoming resignation of the chief executive – due to leave in the autumn of 2001.

My work as an internal consultant demanded that I keep up to date with management theory, specifically in the areas of leadership and change. I used well-established management theories and current thinking to inform the development of leadership and change programmes.

The range of theoretical perspectives pertinent to this study will be explored in detail in the following chapter – but at the beginning of this doctoral study I was drawing on, for example, Kotter's (1996) work on leading change and on what

leaders really do, combined with Zaleznik's (1977) views on the differences between management and leadership as a starting point for formulating leadership development plans and programmes within the Authority. Theories regarding the nature of leadership and differing leadership styles and characteristics were integrated into training programmes, as were change/transition theories and change 'tools'. Up to date thinking regarding, for example, the relationship between training and learning was used to inform the design of a leadership development programme of learning. The anticipated outcome of this approach was that managers/leaders within the new authority would begin to work, behave and relate to each other in new and more positive ways as a result of their learning, and that these new ways of working would then begin to change the culture and increase the success of the organisation.

My interest, in undertaking this study, was to find out the underlying causes of the organisational problems. These problems had been identified by external reviewers, by managers and leaders within the organisation, and by staff. Everyone seemed clear about the problems, and everyone seemed clear about what needed to change. Yet nothing changed. It appeared, on the surface, very simple. From my perspective this illusion of knowledge appeared to make people feel comfortable. This was interesting for me, if a little frustrating. I had a 'hunch' that, despite a prevailing acknowledgement that things needed to change, nothing much would. This council seemed to be 'stuck', and it seemed to be 'stuck' despite knowing that it had a problem, knowing that it needed to change and probably more than capable of doing so.

### **1.5 Identifying the causes**

I became increasingly of the view that despite the relevance and legitimacy of management theory and the obvious need to apply it to organisational life, we seemed to be failing to address the real issues facing people in the organisation (i.e. the causes of the problem) and in turn the areas of performance that we

had repeatedly highlighted as problems (the symptoms). The Council's standards of service delivery, i.e. its organisational performance, had been described as 'poor' during the peer review, and statistical information was available to support this view. (For reasons of confidentiality this has not been provided in this thesis). This was serious, but the peer review had gone further and had commented on behaviours as well as results. To a degree, then, we had a more rounded picture of organisational performance, i.e. that we were failing to achieve satisfactory results, and that individual behaviours were contributing to this. The peer review focused on two kinds of performance; the achievement of outcomes (service delivery) and behaviours within the organisation. This comprehensive view of performance is well captured by Brumbach (1988):

*'Performance means both behaviours and results. Behaviours emanate from the performer and transform performance from abstraction to action. Not just the instruments for results, behaviours are also outcomes in their own right – the product of mental and physical effort applied to tasks – and can be judged apart from results'*. Brumbach, 1988, p. 387

We had information about our *results* as an organisation, and these results were directly affected by individual *behaviours*. The behaviours, as described in the peer review and by Bailey in 2001, were symptoms of something. What was the cause of these behaviours, which impacted negatively on results? The word performance, then, in the context of this study, is used to mean both individual behaviours and organisational results, but this study will focus on individual behaviours and the reasons for these behaviours.

I began to ask myself the following questions (taken from my written notes at the time of the peer review presentation, (6 March 2001)):

- What is the most significant problem facing this organisation, which is the root cause of all the others?
- Why do employees appear to be locked into behaviours which are self-defeating? Why don't they try doing things differently?
- What would staff say about the organisation? Do they have anything else to say which would shed light on what is blocking good performance?

These questions were the catalysts for undertaking the research set out in this thesis. Despite consultation with managers, staff and union representatives, and a range of other data gathering exercises, the information we had obtained about ourselves appeared to me to be somewhat limited. The descriptions of the authority as inward looking, lacking follow through, silo working etc., were worrying, given that the role of the council is to provide a wide range of services for people living in the area, including services which are critical to peoples' lives (e.g. housing, benefits, social services). What I was not clear about, however, was how these performance deficits had developed – i.e. what was the root cause? What in the history of the organisation had created these problems? There was (and still is) no doubt in my mind that the majority of employees within this organisation are perfectly able to work and behave in different ways. So what was stopping them?

The purpose of this thesis is to find some answers. This organisation exists to provide public services, and will at times be responding to the needs of the most vulnerable members of the community. It *matters*, then, that behaviours and attitudes exist which *support* the needs of the community, rather than *obstruct* the delivery of high quality services.

**Chapter 2**  
**The problem with the problem**  
**A review of the literature**

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## Chapter 2

### The problem with the problem

#### A review of the literature

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***'The greatest obstacle to discovering the shape of the earth was not ignorance but the illusion of knowledge'.***

(Daniel Boorstin)

#### 2.0 Introduction

The problems described in the peer review were not, in my view, difficult to understand or impossible to address. They simply required some commitment to doing things in new ways and working together differently, and these changes seemed to me to be within the capability of most if not all staff members. This suggested the possibility of addictive behaviours, which I shall explore in this review of the literature.

The problem seemed to be with the definition of the problem. The focus, when trying to evaluate the organisation, was on performance and behaviours – the visible elements. The 'guess' was that certain ways of thinking, or intentions, existed within the organisation which were leading to particular ways of operating/behaving. The words 'inward focus' and 'silo mentality' were used more than once, to describe the 'culture' of the organisation – this suggested that there existed some intention amongst employees to protect their own interests or territory. But the organisation had no real knowledge of what was driving these ways of thinking. Where did this start? What kind of culture or climate existed which created these ways of thinking and subsequent behaviours? It seemed that there was some information missing, as illustrated



in Figure 1 – what were the invisible beliefs and experiences existing among staff, which were informing decisions and influencing behaviours?

**Figure 1 – beliefs, intentions and behaviours**

Visible	Behaviours	What You See/Hear
Visible to most	Capability and intentions, manifesting themselves in actions and decisions	
Invisible	The assumptions/history/experiences/beliefs which affect capability and intention	

Source: Jenny Knight, 2005

If the *real* problem was no more complex than the one presented by the reviewers, the managers and the staff, then it could have been solved. There had to be some deeper, less visible issues to consider. The questions which remained unanswered, and which, in my view, needed to be addressed before change was possible for this organisation, were:

- What is the most significant problem facing this organisation, which is the root cause of the others?
- Why do employees appear to be locked into behaviours which are self-defeating? Why don't they try doing things differently?

- What would staff say about the organisation? Do they have anything else to say which would shed light on what is blocking good performance?

In order to identify what is already known about these issues, this chapter will provide an overview of the literature in the following areas:

- organisational culture and organisational climate – an overview of the literature defining cultures and climates within organisations – definitions, development and impact. The exploration of the literature will also include reference to organisational psychology/the psychodynamics of organisational life – individuals and their relationships to organisations. Due to the inter-relationship between these two perspectives (I suggest that culture/climate is in no small way affected by the individual's relationship to and interaction with their organisation) I intend to look at these parallel approaches to deciphering organisational life alongside each other. A broad understanding of the key themes and perspectives in these areas will provide me with reference points against which to consider and identify the root causes of this organisation's problem.
- 'frozen' or 'blocked' organisations – some attention to the literature which may provide clues as to why organisations/people in organisations become locked in certain ways of being/behaving. The work on 'blocked' or 'frozen' organisations is *generally* covered within discussions of culture and climate and of organisational psychology. Exceptions exist, which comprise case studies of particular organisations, e.g. Hayes (1991) and Kanter (2003). I have chosen to separate out this part of the literature and explore it in more detail since I believe it is significant in the context of my presenting questions – specifically why employees appear to be locked into behaviours and unable to change.
- addiction, and its applicability to organisations and organisational behaviours – specifically considering its relevance to the organisation in

question, its inability to change, and given my own 'hunches' about the organisation.

It is my intention, in exploring the literature in these three areas, to develop a stronger understanding of organisations and organisational life which will support my analysis of the data and inform my conclusions.

Selected literature in all of the above areas will be examined and considered in more detail later in this thesis, in the light of the data. I have chosen to explore some perspectives in great depth as part of the process of analysing the data – this has been necessary in order to make sense of the respondents' views and comments, and to work with emergent themes and categories. Additional detailed exploration of theoretical perspectives in relation to the research data appear later in this thesis.

At the same time as presenting a range of key perspectives which relate to the areas outlined above, I also raise questions for further consideration, in an attempt to identify gaps in the literature. In the conclusions to this chapter I summarise those areas where I believe there is room for further debate, and where I propose to make a contribution to this debate.

## **2.1 An overview of the literature on organisational culture, climate and psychology**

Since the early 1980s, when perspectives on organisational culture began to form a significant part of organisational studies, the literature has evolved and developed, providing an enormous, if somewhat perplexing, range of perspectives – including literature relating to the differences between culture and climate.

Explanations of culture have been used by a range of academics to explain behaviours in organisations, to explain corporate success or failure, and to arrive at recommendations about what is good, or constructive organisational culture, and what is not. In exploring culture there is an acknowledgement amongst writers in this field that organisational strategy will not necessarily determine organisational performance and success – however, organisational culture may well do.

Furnham (1997) suggests that organisational culture may be formed by the founders of any organisation, or by those who most recently shaped the organisation. These individuals' attitudes and values are readily transmitted to employees. Given their part in the recruitment process at the top of the organisation, it is likely that individuals will be appointed who reflect the values and principles of the organisation's leader/founder. It may also, he suggests, be developed out of, or changed by, organisational experience. Values (ways of working/thinking/being) develop as a result of the need to interact successfully with a changing environment, and these values become part of the organisational culture. Furnham's third suggestion is that cultures develop as a result of the need to develop and maintain effective working relationships among organisation members. These three possibilities do not seem to be mutually exclusive, and if we accept that they are not, then it would seem reasonable to suggest that organisational cultures will remain fluid, changing and developing in response to external and internal variables. This would suggest that organisations operating in an environment of continual change would have continually changing cultures. The data do not suggest that this is the case in the organisation in question – quite the opposite, in fact. I will return to this in the conclusions to this chapter.

Furnham's broad perspectives are useful (particularly the third suggestion, as this has led me to explore in more detail the literature on the psychodynamics of organisational life as part of this review of the literature), since the copious

amounts of literature provide a wide range of definitions, perspectives and assertions. They range from Kroeber and Kluckman's (1952:181) definition of culture as consisting of patterns, behaviours, artefacts and values, through to Martin's (2001) suggestion that to study culture is to draw attention to aspects of organisational life which have been previously understudied or ignored and Alvesson's (2002) work on the relationship between leadership, change and culture. The mix of disciplines interested in the topic of culture appears to add to the confusion rather than increase clarity (sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists and experts on organisational behaviour all have much to say on this subject), and there have been a range of ways in which researchers have tried to present the concept of organisational culture. Definitions, dimensions, taxonomies and impacts of culture have all been presented as ways in which to understand the subject – for example, Atkinson's (1990) underlying assumptions; Schein's (1990) dimensions of corporate culture; Graves's (1986) barbarian, monarchical, presidential and pharaonic culture (taxonomy) and Evan's (1978) work on the impact of culture and its relationship to organisational performance.

### Definitions of culture

Probably the most straightforward and the most commonly held view of the *definition* of organisational culture is 'how things are done around here'. Atkinson (1990) explains organisational culture as reflecting the underlying assumptions about the way work is performed; what is acceptable and not acceptable and the behaviour and actions which are encouraged and not encouraged. McLean and Marshall (1993) describe culture as a collection of traditions, values, policies, beliefs and attitudes that constitute a pervasive context for the thoughts and actions of an organisation. Culture is reinforced through communication, expectation and behaviours. Commonly used words relating to culture, according to Schein (1985) are '*shared*' or '*held in common*' – such as norms, values, behaviour patterns, rituals, traditions – these have been

described in a range of ways (e.g. observed behavioural regularities, group norms, habits of thinking, mental models, shared meanings etc) by a range of writers – Goffman (1959), Deal and Kennedy (1982), Ritti and Funkhouser (1982), Schneider (1990), Argyris and Schon (1978), Hofstede (1980), Geertz (1973), Schultz (1991). This all might also be described as the creation of patterns, or of meaning, in organisations by workers – indeed Schein talks of culture formation as a strive towards patterning and integration. This pervading view of culture as the creation of patterns and meaning out of experiences is a reference point against which to consider the organisation in question, and define or describe its culture. Schein (1985) suggests that there are three levels of culture – artefacts – the physical and social environment; values and beliefs, and basic underlying assumptions. His view that the basic assumptions are the essence of the culture of an organisation, is pertinent to this study. My purpose, in undertaking this research, was to find out what these basic assumptions and beliefs were, where they came from and how they were impacting on behaviours.

The literature on definition provides a strong framework within which to analyse the prevailing culture of this organisation, and will be re-visited in depth later in this thesis. What remains somewhat unclear, however, is whether meaning and patterns are always created as a *result* of observed traditions, values, policies attitudes etc., or whether it is possible that a culture can be created as a consequence of the perceived *absence* of clues about traditions, values, policies, attitudes etc. In other words, could an organisational culture be created which reflected a lack of common understanding of the organisational culture? If so, could this be described as a culture? If what we are teaching each other is that we don't know what the rules/norms/acceptable ways of behaving are – i.e. we don't know how we do things around here, then could this lack of knowing become the 'culture' of the organisation? Or should this be described as a 'condition' or a 'state', rather than a culture? Where does culture begin and end, and when does the study of what makes an organisation tick become the study

of something other than organisational culture? Could we be missing the third level, as we define and discuss culture – i.e. the deep, dark ‘stuff’ that drives us, which is based on history and experience, and which creates in us a set of intentions, which manifest themselves in our behaviours. If the experience is of uncertainty and lack of clarity, as a result of constant change, what kinds of ways of thinking and what intentions may develop as a result of this, and how would these ways of thinking and intentions manifest themselves in behaviours and actions? Do the theoretical perspectives on culture address this invisible level of human operation within organisations, and how this invisible, below the surface ‘stuff’ impacts on the development of ‘ways of doing things around here’? Should they?

### Dimensions of culture

Schein’s (1985) seven dimensions of organizational culture attempt to provide the basic questions which would reveal some of the more hidden and implicit facets of culture. Based on the work of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) he provides information about the deeper dimensions around which shared basic assumptions form. His focus is on assumptions made about:

- the nature and reality of truth
- the nature of time
- the nature of space
- the nature of human nature
- the nature of human activity
- the nature of human relationships
- homogeneity versus diversity

He asserts that truth and reality can exist in the physical environment, at group level, and for individuals, based on their own experiences; that the use of time

(the pacing of events, the sequence in which things are done and the duration of events) becomes subject to symbolic interpretation; that the use of space (for example the claiming of office space) will create assumptions about culture. Whether or not these assumptions will be shared, even if people see the same thing, is open to question – Schein himself points out that truth will be different for different people and in different contexts. His perspective is that the definitions of reality, truth, time and space are representative of the deepest level of assumptions, and these assumptions provide the basis for avoiding anxiety and uncertainty. The question which remains unclear is how these assumptions become shared – or is there still a possibility that the shared assumption could be that we have no assumptions?

Schein reminds us that in every culture there are shared assumptions about what it is to be human – what kinds of behaviour are acceptable, and what kinds of behaviour are inhuman. Closely connected are the assumptions about the appropriate way for human beings to act in relation to their environment, and at the organisational level, how workers and managers are viewed. He also questions whether a group is better off if it is highly diverse or if it is highly homogenous. This raises another aspect to consider when developing an understanding of an existing culture – its current composition and the impact of this on the organisational culture. He asserts that whilst behaviours and artefacts may be observable and beliefs and values articulated, it is only possible to understand these behaviours and beliefs if the underlying or basic assumptions are made manifest. Schein's perspective on underlying assumptions and their impact on culture provides a partial answer to the question of how to get to the 'heart' of organisational culture. He acknowledges that culture is deep, wide and complex, and that no one or two dimensions should be used to stereotype an organisation. It would appear, then, that there is no simple way to develop an understanding of what makes an organisation tick, other than to try to identify existing underlying assumptions, which are the force behind beliefs and behaviours.



## Taxonomies of culture

Graves (1986), Deal and Kennedy (1982), Williams et al (1989), Handy (1993), Johnson (1992), and a range of other writers have provided perspectives on types or taxonomies of culture. Key perspectives are examined in detail in chapter 6 of this thesis, with reference to the data. Furnham (1997) highlights the similarities between groupings, and suggests that this indicates a certain level of reliability in the observations of writers. The descriptions or metaphors used to define taxonomies suggest 4 overall kinds of culture:

- a culture based on power (described as tough guy, barbarian, power oriented etc)
- a culture based on achievement which is people oriented (person, work/play hard, presidential etc)
- a culture which is based on mutual support (supportive, monarchical, dynamic, task oriented etc)
- a culture which is based on process (bureaucratic, role oriented, pharoanic etc).

The literature provides a starting point against which to describe the organisation – to give it a label, but merely using the literature providing descriptions of types of culture leaves many questions unanswered. It is generally acknowledged by writers on organisational culture that corporate culture is not completely explainable or definable in terms of ‘types’ – although the types presented provide a strong basis for considering an existing culture (and selected perspectives will be used in this study), and which description best fits the culture. How this culture came to exist is not known, nor are the mechanisms which determine and perpetuate cultures. Schein’s work on basic assumptions provides some clues as to ways to find answers to these questions, but Schein also reminds us that it is possible that no single set of

assumptions have formed the basis for operating; sub-groups may have different assumptions and therefore bases for operating. In which case, should the researcher be looking for something other than assumptions about the way things are done, or about what is good or bad behaviour, or symbolised by the use of time or space? If these assumptions could be contradictory, depending on the nature of truth for people, then should the researcher be not only attempting to define the culture, but also to find out what the dominant 'state' of the organisation is? The literature on organisational climate may help here, and this will be considered later in this chapter, after further exploration of culture.

### Impact of culture

It would be reasonable to assume that the existence of a strong organisational culture would generate pressure on members of that organisation to think and act in particular ways. However, Baron and Greenberg (1990) suggest that this is far from clear. They challenge the assumption that organisations possess single, unitary cultures, and they debate the meaning of the word 'strong' in the context of organisational culture. A range of definitions of 'strong' cultures have been provided by researchers, and these definitions have been arrived at in different ways and by assessing different variables. What is missing from the studies is comparison, and what is not clear is the relationship between 'strong' cultures (as defined in the research studies) and good performance. It is not necessarily so that a 'strong' culture is a 'good' culture – indeed, the organisation researched in this thesis would appear to have a very strong culture – a culture which was proving difficult to change or develop. This does not, however, make it a 'good' culture. The relationship between strength and success can only be established, it is suggested by Baron and Greenberg, (1990), Furnham (1997) and Evan (1978), if research is undertaken which makes direct connections between comparable cultures and comparable performance. The issue of generalizability will be returned to later on in this thesis.

Corporate culture remains difficult to precisely define. Dimensions, categories and definitions all provide reference points against which to develop an understanding and description of an organisational culture, as well as a possible definition of a desired culture. However, it is unclear how culture impacts on performance, or if culture is the same thing as morale. Schein's work suggests that basic assumptions impact on beliefs and behaviours. Would they also impact on morale, and therefore does morale not have some impact on behaviours? And which came first - the culture, which created the morale, or the morale, which created the culture? Or does morale itself create a set of basic assumptions in people? Or is morale part of the definition of organisational climate? And is it possible to have a strong climate, based on morale, and a weak culture? And what affects morale?

### Organisational Climate

Gellerman (1960) describes the climate as the 'personality' of the organisation. James and Jones (1974) suggest the term 'psychological climate' be used, suggesting that it is the cognitive interpretations of the workforce which arise from experiences of the organisation and provide a representation of the meaning inherent in the organizational features, events and processes. This would seem to accord with the notion of dimensions shaping basic assumptions about the way things are done, as described by Schein, but considered in the context of 'culture'. Rentsch (1990) suggests that climate is as a result of organisational members perceiving and making sense of organisational policies and procedures in psychologically meaningful terms.

Organisational 'climate' would appear to be as difficult to define as the term 'culture'. Furnham (1997) likens it to the weather – the way in which the climate of a region results from the combination of environmental forces. Applied to organisations, the word may be said to relate to the prevailing 'atmosphere'

surrounding the organisation, to the level of morale and to the feelings of belonging, the relationships and the level of goodwill existing in an organisation. Mullins (1999) suggests that climate *influences* morale, as well as suggesting that the term climate relates to levels of morale. Both perspectives will be true – for example an organisation comprising a workforce with low morale can be said to have a climate of low morale. This prevailing climate will almost certainly influence members of the organisation – new members, members who perhaps in different circumstances would be more motivated etc. The problem here is the lack of clarity about which came first. It would appear that climate can be self-perpetuating, if we take these two perspectives as valid. The existence of these two perspectives is useful when we consider in more detail the issue of frozen or blocked organisations – organisations locked in patterns and behaviours which are proving difficult to escape.

Moran and Volkwein (1992) conclude that

*'since climate operates at a more accessible level than culture, it is more malleable and, hence, the more appropriate level at which to target short-term interventions aimed at producing organizational change....(however) interventions to change climate must consider the deeper patterns embedded in an organization's climate'. (p.43)*

Mullins (1999) suggests that whilst organisational culture describes what the organisation is about, organisational climate is an indication of the employees' feelings and beliefs regarding what the organisation is about. Climate, he suggests, is based on *perceptions*. This view would appear to challenge Moran and Volkwein's assertion that climate would be more accessible and more malleable. Whilst it may be relatively simple to assess climate based on morale, goodwill etc., it could be argued that interventions driven by the desire to improve morale etc could fail, given that morale may well be the result of underlying assumptions. Alternatively, an organisational climate may be created

as a result of a set of circumstances, and this climate may be malleable given the existence of a strong culture. How malleable organisational climate is remains open to debate, since the key question is whether the climate is temporary and *separate* from the culture, or whether it is created out of a set of circumstances and can, over time, *create* the culture.

Taguiri and Litwin (1968), writing at the time when the subject of organisational climate became popular, suggested that it is difficult to provide a definition which is not trivial, because it encompasses so much. Furnham and Gunter (1993) describe it as

*'An indirect determinant of behaviour in that it acts upon attitudes, expectations and states of arousal which are direct determinants of behaviour'* (p.115-116)

This description seems to be referring to the 'condition' or 'emotional state' of an organisation, which may exist as a result of experience and expectations and which will certainly determine behaviour. This would suggest, then, that the *climate* of an organisation is the deep level or organisational life which either influences or is influenced by basic/underlying assumptions, and which then creates beliefs/intentions and behaviours.

The concept of organisational climate would appear to be elusive –seemingly contradictory perspectives exist which would all appear to be valid, and there is a real danger that the term climate can be made to mean just about anything we want it to. The most helpful perspective for me, in the context of this study, is Furnham and Gunter's (above). What is still not clear, however, is whether states of arousal or morale are *affected* by underlying assumptions (drawing on the work of Schein), or whether underlying assumptions can be *created* by states of arousal or morale. Which came first – the assumption leading to the

mood, or the mood leading to the assumption? Which came first, the culture or the climate? And whichever came first, what caused that?

### Differences between culture and climate

Many recent studies of culture, emerging in the early 1980s, appear to resemble those studies of organisational climate, which began in the 1960s. For example, similar perspectives on organisational risk-taking are explored by climate and culture researchers and are labelled accordingly. Chatham (1991) explored risk taking and defined it as a cultural phenomenon and Litwin and Stringer (1968) defined it as a perspective of organisational climate. Writers focusing on organisational culture, e.g. Schein (1990) and Alvesson (2002) have not engaged in any depth with the discussions on organisational climate and the relationship between climate and culture.

Broadly, culture researchers tend to focus on the evolution of social systems over time, whereas climate researchers have tended to be more concerned with the impact of organisational systems on groups and on industries. For example, Schein's (1990) focus is on underlying assumptions (culture study) whereas Guion's (1973) focus is on perceptions of observable practices. Culture, therefore, is generally regarded as more stable and harder to change than climate, which is considered relatively temporary and subject to direct control. An example might be of any organisation which has a strong and positive culture of team working and achievement, where motivation levels are high and performance is good. This culture has been built on a set of shared values, beliefs and underlying assumptions about how things are done. Then something bad happens – perhaps the team lose a valued member of staff – he or she is 'poached' by another company. The *climate* might temporarily change, as a result of the perceptions of what has just happened. If we accept the above differences, it would be argued that the existence of a strong and positive culture combined with the right kinds of intervention (perhaps a team discussion/away-

day) will ensure that this climate change is only temporary. But what if, in some circumstances, climate proves difficult to change. Perceptions take hold, and climate remains the same. Could this indicate an *absence* of culture, or a weak culture, and the development of a culture as a result of the prevailing climate?

It would be reasonable to suggest that both climate and culture researchers are examining the psychological environment of organisations, and how meaning is made by individuals of their work context. Culture and climate are about the creation and experience of the organisational environment – culture the creation, climate the experience. For me, the difference is minimal, and either could affect the other, depending on the organisation's life history and its context. The question remains, what creates culture? The use of the words 'features' (to describe climate) and 'context' (to describe culture) provide some clues as to the difference, but also provide some clues as to the similarities and relationships between both concepts. Features exist because of context, context exists because of features. Schein (1990) draws on the work of Lewin (1947) in his observations of 'frozen' cultures – Lewin's work is based on a study of organisational climate. The relationships appear to be very close.

The literature suggests that the study of both culture and climate seeks to understand the creation and effect of social contexts in organisations. Whilst the definitions suggest a clear distinction, i.e. that climate can be temporary and manipulated and culture can be rooted in history and hard to change, what interests me is whether, in the absence of a clear culture, a climate can develop which can then become a culture. If so, how would this happen? Morgan (1998) asserts that cultures will vary depending on the stage of development of the organisation. This suggests that even an organisation which is relatively new and which perhaps has developed out of a 'merger' (for example 3 organisations into one) would have a culture (or maybe three distinct cultures, and some sub-cultures). Morgan does not use the word 'climate'. Again, I wonder whether it is reasonable to talk of 'culture' in the absence of clarity; in

the absence of shared values, beliefs and assumptions; in the absence of a shared understanding about 'the way we do things around here'. Morgan asserts that culture cannot be imposed – it develops during the course of social interaction. His view is that in any organisation there may be competing values and organisational realities rather than a uniform culture. This is useful, and provides some clues as to the reasons for my own confusion about the word culture and its usefulness in helping us to understand organisations and organisational life. Perhaps the word is used in different ways, to mean different things – by writers in the field, by organisational consultants, managers and staff within organisations, all of whom may have a different perspective on what it is they are seeking to understand and work with. The assumption that a culture exists and therefore we ought to be able to define and describe it may create a whole new set of problems for organisations themselves and for those people seeking to understand them - possible feelings of confusion, failure, uncertainty etc. Perhaps, despite the agreement amongst writers that shadow, sub and counter-cultures can exist within organisations, the regular use of the term 'culture' as a way of defining and describing organisational life implies something which can be created, observed and understood (although not so easily changed, according to the writers). This implication has the potential to create as many problems as it does solutions. At this stage, then, I shall avoid making a choice about which word is more appropriate to use and will remain open to what emerges during the fieldwork of this study.

#### Other ways of describing organisations, and how they may help us understand organisations

In addition to the wealth of literature on culture and climate, and the differences between culture and climate, writers have used other terms - from the machine metaphor through to the description of the organisation as displaying a range of neuroses. Much of this literature is explored in some detail in this thesis, in an attempt to develop an understanding of the condition, state, culture or climate of



the organisation in question. Morgan's (1998) 'images of organisations' gives the clear message that the number of ways we can think about organisations is limitless; metaphors can be created, extended and developed to fit any organisation, and can be used as 'labels' to explain what is going on in an organisation. Morgan suggests eight possible metaphors for organisations, which represent very different ways of construing it. The machine, the organism, the brain, the psychic prison, the political system, as flux and transformation and as a vehicle for domination Kets de Vries and Miller (1984) provide us with five organisational styles – paranoid, compulsive, dramatic, depressive and schizoid, with explanations of the potential strengths and weaknesses of each style. Fromm (2000) provides us with creative definitions of leadership within organisations, and its impact on and relationship to culture – narcissists, obsessives, erotic personalities and marketing personalities. Bolman and Deal (1997) use the notion of theatre to describe organisations – places where dramas are played out that provide reassurance and foster belief in the organisation's purpose. They suggest that this metaphor provides an opportunity – for people to re-frame their existences – to revise the drama if they wish. Thompson (2002) provides 'recipes' in his 'cookbook' designed to create a healthy workforce. This use of metaphor – the creative way in which writers in the field grapple with the issue of what makes organisations 'tick' – has provided me with a range of reference points against which to examine this organisation. Later in this thesis key metaphors will be explored in relation to the data. However, I suggest there is a limit to the level of understanding gained through the application of metaphor – whilst being creative they could also be described as simplistic and restraining. On their own they are not enough to help us fully understand what makes an organisation the way it is. They do not necessarily provide us with an understanding of how the organisation came to be the way it is.

## Organisational Psychology and its place in understanding culture or climate

What may also help to get to the heart of this organisation's problems (as defined earlier) is some consideration of the literature which focuses on the psychodynamics of organisational life. By paying some attention to a variety of perspectives in this area, it may be possible to identify individual behaviours, attitudes and characteristics which will impact on the creation of organisational cultures, climates, states or conditions. Whilst acknowledging that history and experience of organisational life will impact on morale, assumptions, beliefs and behaviours, I suggest that the desire in individuals to protect their own interests, meet their own physical, emotional and psychological needs and avoid uncertainty and anxiety (regardless of history) will play a part in the development of a particular organisational state, condition etc. The application of existing metaphors to this organisation may well aid understanding, as well as more detailed consideration of the individual behaviours, and the relationship between the individual and the organisation, which serve to create the organisational state.

The 'psychological contract' (Schein, 1988, Kotter, 1973 and McBain, 1997, Guest and Conway, 2000) is the unwritten set of mutual expectations arising from the people-organisational relationship. These expectations do not form part of a formal agreement – on the part of the employee they comprise such things as respect, trust, autonomy, fairness, and participation, and on the part of the employer they comprise, for example, trust, hard work and loyalty. French et al (1985) suggest that there is likely to be a conflict between the organisational expectations and those requirements of the individual (for example, while the individual requires respect and autonomy, the organisation expects that the individual will adhere to organisational goals, even if these are not *their* goals). The process of ensuring that both sets of expectations are met to the reasonable satisfaction of both sides (French et al suggest that it will rarely be the case that these can be met fully) consists of balancing and bargaining (both

implicit and explicit). This unconscious set of expectations will affect relationships and attitudes within organisations, and if either side experiences disappointment, then it is suggested that this will influence future decisions and behaviours.

This psychological contract, if perceived to have been broken, may well produce a deterioration in levels of motivation and a related range of responses, and this is worthy of more consideration.

Motivation theory is covered in depth later in this thesis. However, at this stage it is worth noting that perspectives on motivation (for example Maslow's (1987), Herzberg's (1966), Alderfer's (1972), discussions of a hierarchy of needs, Lawler and Rhode's (1976) discussion of rewards and expectations and Adams' (1965) work on equity theory) all relate to the psychological contract – the implicit, unspoken expectations existing within organisations. As well as studies of motivation levels in organisations, and the factors affecting motivation, writers in the field of organisational psychology provide perspectives on human behaviour in groups and in organisations. These range from the earlier studies of group behaviour by such writers as Max Weber (1930), Lewin (1947), Mayo (1945) and Freud (1922) to the more recent work of writers such as Hirschhorn (1998, 2000), writing on the psychodynamics of organisational life; Argyris (1990, 2000) exploring defensive behaviours in organisations; Schein (1988) providing an overview of motivation and of group behaviours, and Herriot (2001) exploring relationship psychology, dialogue and trust in organisations.

This wide ranging exploration of what makes people tick in organisations serves to highlight the complexity of organisational life, and the challenge of describing culture, or understanding where it came from, or how to change it. Argyris (1990) describes how defensive reasoning can get played out in real life, and refers to 'skilled incompetence'. Hirschhorn (1997, 2000) highlights the existence of 'distant authority' and 'competitive equals' within the workplace, and

the effect this has on our ability to collaborate and our tendency to pass on psychological damage. Harrison (1995) draws our attention to individual responses to change (informed by the work of Kubler-Ross, 1969), Schein (1988) reminds us of the impact of group think (influenced by the work of Janis and Mann, 1977). De Board (1978) discusses the implications for adult behaviour of Klein's (1959) detailed theories of the earliest mental processes in the life of the infant. Goleman (1998) raises our awareness of the difficulties attached to speaking truth to power; Block (2002) writes about our natural tendency towards avoiding action in the workplace, and a range of writers explore broad psychological theories and consider their application to organisational behaviours. Selected aspects of this literature are drawn on in chapters 6 and 7, and are considered in the light of the results of the fieldwork.

What the literature makes clear for me is the difficulty of diagnosing an organisation's problem, and the futility of attempting to apply a single model, label or perspective to an organisation. The confusion surrounding climate versus culture, combined with the considerable amount of literature where metaphors, personalities or neuroses are applied to organisations and the people in them, and the writings on human relationships and group dynamics in the workplace (organisational psychology) create both clarity and confusion at the same time. Key perspectives strike a chord with me, in relation to the data, and these will be used to make sense of the findings. Others raise more questions than provide answers, and those questions will be considered later in this thesis. This council seemed to be 'stuck', and this was despite knowing it needed to change. My question is why? What was causing certain behaviours and preventing others?

An exploration of the literature which seems to provide some more clues as to the causes of or cures for 'frozen' or 'blocked' organisations might provide some clues.

## **2.2 An overview of the literature relating to 'Frozen' or 'Blocked' Organisations**

There are a range of perspectives on organisational life which provide clues as to why they may get 'stuck'. Many of these perspectives will, by necessity, be explored in detail as part of the analysis of the data. Selected examples of the diverse ways in which we might develop an understanding of the 'sticking points' in organisations are provided below – some are drawn from theories on organisational psychology, others from writers on organisations and organisational behaviours.

The experiences that groups in organisations need to undergo in order to emerge as working teams has been explored in the context of the social psychology of groups. A range of conceptual models have been used to examine group growth and development processes. Team development perspectives, such as Tuckman's (1965) and Bass and Ryterband's (1979) studies of the development sequences of small groups as well as the exploration of behaviours such as 'social loafing' (Karau and Williams, 1993), go some way to providing possible explanations of what may cause organisations to get 'stuck'. Tuckman talks of 'forming, storming, norming and performing' as development stages leading to cohesiveness and Bass and Ryterband talk of mutual acceptance and membership, communication and decision making, motivation and productivity and control and organisation. These perspectives relate to the work of Kurt Lewin (1947), who talks of three learning stages – freezing (holding on to what we know/are familiar with), unfreezing (exploring ideas, issues and approaches) and refreezing (identifying, utilising and integrating values, attitudes and skills with those previously held and currently desired).

The literature has provided some clues as to possible places where things are not working. For example, if groups never reach a level of productivity and

control, because of the absence of mutual acceptance and membership, then performance would be affected. If members of groups in organisations regard themselves as 'invisible' then the practice of 'social loafing' could become part of organisational life. It is possible that this could be the case if an organisation has been through a great deal of change, and the literature on individual responses to change would point to a difficulty in establishing strong and productive team relationships, and feelings of 'invisibility'. This has been described and discussed by a number of writers, e.g. Hayes (2002), Harrison (1995), Sennett (1998), Bridges (1995) and explored in detail later in this thesis. Added to this, motivation theory – specifically the perspectives on hierarchies of need (also explored in detail later in this thesis) - suggests that far from seeking self-fulfilment, individuals facing uncertainty may seek to have their basic levels of motivation met. By combining theories of team development, motivation theories and theories regarding individual responses to change, it is possible to see that feelings of uncertainty, insecurity and 'invisibility' in the face of change could lead 'survival' behaviours (Hayes, 2002) and then to 'frozen' organisations.

Issues such as 'locus of control' and 'expectations' (Lawler and Rhode, 1976) and 'attributions' (Heider, 1958) will all impact on attitudes and beliefs in organisations, and will all impact on the ability of the organisation to remain fluid, changing and developing in response to external and internal variables. These perspectives provide more clues as to how an organisation may end up 'stuck' – it may well depend on levels of control people perceive that they have, levels of expectation and whether or not people believe that circumstances are their own or someone else's responsibility. The question which will create the prevailing organisational culture/climate/state/condition is, then, what would people have learned, and how would this learning manifest itself in behaviours, which would militate against change? And how are people teaching each other what they have learned?

An alternative to Lewin's (1947) 'freezing/unfreezing/re-freezing' metaphor is offered by Argyris and Schon (1978), who assert that individuals in organisations need to be helped to learn to learn – they provide the double loop learning process – 'learning to learn'. Argyris and Schon suggest that for any person to examine how they are operating and to attempt to alter patterns of work behaviour it will be necessary for them to develop new attitudes, skills and ideas. In order to achieve this, they will need to spend time learning how to learn new things and re-examine their learning from the past. This suggests the need for a learning environment to be created within the organisation, and serves as a reminder that in order to understand why an organisation becomes 'stuck' it will be necessary to develop an understanding of what has been learned in the past, and how it was learned; a process of learning, un-learning and re-learning? There is, it seems, a critical relationship between an organisation's ability to learn and it's ability to change. What has this organisation learned? How is this learning affecting behaviours and performance? What needs to be 'un-learned' in order for this organisation to change?

Kotter (1996) provides suggestions as to why organisations fail to improve as a result of structural and cultural change programmes. He suggests that existing in the organisation there is a lack of sense of urgency to change; that a guiding coalition does not exist; that there is no strong vision; that the vision (such as it is) is not communicated effectively; that obstacles will get in the way of achievement of the vision; that there are no short-term wins; that change is assumed to have been achieved too soon and that changes are not anchored in new ways of working/behaving. His perspectives may provide some clues as to what has gone wrong – more particularly in relation to what was *learned* by people as a result of these experiences, and how is this learning influencing beliefs and behaviours? Whilst Kotter's model provides a basis upon which to scrutinise stages, it does not tell me what is stopping people from letting go of the past, letting go of self-defeating behaviours and doing things differently –

especially since they have all expressed a desire for things to be better in the organisation.

Kanter (2003) provides a case study of an organisation in decline, as does Hayes (1991). Both writers provide possible reasons for this decline, as well as methods of changing the organisation for the better. These case studies both suggest low morale and patterns of behaviour which militate against organisational change. Writers in the field of organisational psychology and organisational behaviour have provided a diversity of case studies/anecdotes which illustrate their own experiences of working in or with dysfunctional organisations (e.g. Argyris, 1990, Sennett, 1998, Hirschhorn, 2000). Whilst these examples help to the degree that some of the symptoms are recognisable, and some of the reasons for the symptoms are likely to be the same for the organisation I am researching, the question still remains, why, if these people want to change, can't they do so? What is stopping them? It is for this reason I devote a substantial part of this literature review to the writing on addiction and addictive behaviours.

De Board (1978) discusses the work of Bion (1968), focusing on the way individuals and groups deal with anxiety – he reminds us of the use of projection as a way of defending the ego. Bion believes that in a group the basic explanation of action lies in individual behaviour which is a result of interconnected projection processes. De Board suggests that these processes exist in organisations, and suggests that organisations can be developed out of the need for defence mechanisms – institutions used by individuals to reinforce individual mechanisms of defence against anxiety. Jaques (1955) hypothesises that within the life of an organisation the defence against anxiety is one of the primary elements that bind individuals together. He suggests that in any organisation behaviours will be exhibited based on hostility and suspicion, and these behaviours will be projected onto others. The behaviours are 'pooled'. Jaques and Bion have provided some food for thought – is it really possible to



define culture without taking into account these complex human behaviours and defences, which exist outside of organisations and which may be exaggerated in organisations as a result of the nature of organisational life – i.e. relationships based on need rather than choice, the transience of working life, power relationships, vulnerability etc. All of these things, it could be argued, exist for everyone who works in an organisation. However, the degree to which individuals engage in defensive behaviours is likely to vary, according to the organisation's history and context, and the resulting feelings of anger, anxiety and hostility.

The work on general systems theory, which builds on Bion's perspectives, provides another possible explanation for the 'frozen' culture. De Board reminds us that if an individual is under intense anxiety then energy previously used to define the boundaries between what is inside and outside of the individual and control the transactions between one and the other will be withdrawn and invested into defence mechanisms. De Board suggests that in these cases people operate as a closed systems. The withdrawal of energy from engagement with the outside world can move an organisation into a closed system – energy is then used in the avoidance of real issues and in internal battles. This behaviour will prevent energy being available for legitimate work, but will not serve to defend individuals from reality.

*'The needs of the members of the organisation to use it in the struggle against anxiety leads to the development of socially structured defence mechanisms which appear as elements in the structure, culture and mode of functioning of the organisation. A social defence system develops over time as the result of collusive interaction and agreement, often unconscious, between members of the organisation as to what form it will take. The socially structured defence mechanisms then tend to become an aspect of external reality with which old and new members of the institution must come to terms'. (Menzies, 1970, p.10)*

This concept of social defence systems provides some explanation as to why organisational change is so difficult – why it would appear that organisations become ‘frozen’, and why loss of control will reinforce defensive behaviours – more suspicion, more hostility and more aggression.

Lewin (1947) reminds us of the worth of practical application of organisational theory to real situations as a way of developing an understanding of the organisation/system, and suggests that the way to develop an understanding of an organisation is to try and change it. His view that organisations are best understood through intervention, and that this intervention should be based on a theoretical model of how the system is currently working.

I intended to apply a range of perspectives to this organisation, in an attempt to understand better what is driving it to operate in the way that it does, and what is preventing it from changing. However, I remained open to the possibility of addiction theory helping me make sense of the organisation, and so now turn to an exploration of the literature on addiction and addictive behaviours.

### **2.3 An overview of the literature on addiction**

In parallel with Menzies’ (1970), writing about defences against anxiety, and their tendency to become habitual, Nakken (1996) defines addiction as an attempt to control the uncontrollable – the desire to attain permanent peace of mind and to avoid the feelings of sadness and mourning associated with life changes, uncertainty and disappointment.

He talks of addictive rituals and their role in binding us to our beliefs and values and connecting us to others with similar beliefs and values. Addicts will act in ways which support their beliefs, and by doing this they avoid the internal conflict felt when faced with choices.

Nakken asserts that the community to which addicts become tied will provide them with direction and with rules of conduct (a common form of 'acting out'). However, he says that addictive communities are not caring communities – relationships are superficial and based on the maintenance of beliefs and behaviours. The primary emotional attachment in an addictive community, asserts Nakken, is not to others but to the thing or behaviour which is the addiction.

He describes addicts as self-righteous and self-centred people who become angry when challenged or questioned, and who project their anger and stress onto others.

Nakken talks of spiritual 'death'- as the addictive personality gains more control and the addict loses their ability to influence their own thoughts and behaviour the sense of knowing oneself and one's values drifts further and further away.

Like Nakken, Bailey (1990) views addiction as the search for serenity. He suggests that becoming an addict is often related to a desperate search outside of ourselves for a positive feeling. Insecurity in human beings, he explains, is characterised by feeling out of control, and the need to feel good and to be rid of those feelings of insecurity and being out of control drives us to addictive habits. Bailey suggests that those feelings of insecurity, unhappiness and uncontrollability are directly connected to our thought systems – the storage of experiences in what becomes a personalised thought system. We process data into concepts, beliefs and opinions which make up our frames of reference. All thoughts, he says, operate according to a uniform set of principles, and these principles are about validation of our pre-existing views and maintenance of the status quo. Bailey talks of people becoming 'victims' of their own belief systems. Bailey's point is that our personalised thought systems, which create our reality, will hamper our ability to have insights and to understand that our destiny is in

our control. When we do not appreciate that things can be perceived in other ways, and that our beliefs need to be open to challenge, we become engaged in habitual and self defeating behaviours. Twerski (1997) writes of self deception and addictive thinking in the same vein – he talks of addicts being taken in by their own distorted thinking and he asserts that they are the victims of their own thinking.

Bailey's distinction between *habit* and *addiction* is useful – he talks of acquiring habits due to complex processes of conditioning and shaping. We learn ways of seeing things, ways of looking at the world, using our 'filtering' systems, and these beliefs will result in a set of habitual behaviours. Habits are difficult to break because once formed we don't consciously think about them. Habits save time and effort.

Bailey's explanation of how habits develop and how they sustain themselves is useful – habits are different from addiction, and this will be considered in relation to the applicability of theories on addiction.

Bailey describes the journey from habit to addiction. He talks of people living in a 'lower state of understanding' – dissatisfied with life and susceptible to addiction. This insecure state of mind produces stress and low self-esteem and will militate against a personal state of serenity. In this weakened state, asserts Bailey, people are more likely to 'catch' negative habits. Once they have experienced the positive feelings connected with the habit, they will become conditioned to repeating the process. A complex web of rationalisations then develops for the individual making it possible for them to defend their actions.

Twerski talks of addictive thinking as self-deception – the addict begins with a conclusion about what they need and then builds a case for that conclusion. He identifies the key traits prevalent in addictive thinking as denial, projection,

rationalisation and omnipotence – these traits are brought into play to bolster the insistence that the person is right.

Firman and Gila (1997) talk of loss of true self, and the emergence of a false self emerging to take the place of self. They talk of the consequence of loss of awareness of true self, and the gradual belief that who we now say we are is the truth – the projection of the false self becomes a habit, and finally an addiction.

Whitfield's (1991) description of a state of 'non-being' is interesting in the context of this research. Whitfield talks of addictive behaviours as an attempt to form some sense of selfhood in the face of a potential fall into a state of non-existence. Winnicott (1987) describes this as being locked in a 'role' or in a 'world view', which will give us a sense of being, as opposed to non-being. Tart (1987) describes it as the 'Consensus Trance' – the sleep of everyday life.

I now turn to the work of Schaefer and Fassel (1988), who have written persuasively on the relevance of addiction theory to organisational behaviours.

Schaefer and Fassel (1988) have applied addiction theory to organisational life, in their book *The Addictive Organisation*. They ask why organisations continue to spend large amounts of money on consulting packages after they discover there is no real or lasting change as a result of these interventions. Schaefer and Fassel assert that organisations are addictive environments with individuals stuck in dysfunctional habits and behaviours and unable to see a way to change, and that they need to be supported to 'recover' from these behaviours. They talk of co-dependent behaviours existing within organisations and being adopted by change consultants. They describe co-dependent behaviours as those behaviours which support and maintain the addictive system, such as taking care of others, saying and doing the right thing – colluding with the addict. In short, Schaefer and Fassel believe that addiction and co-dependent behaviours are at the root of any organisation's inability to change. They describe incidents

in organisations (in the USA) where they have experienced these behaviours, and they assert that organisational development consultants persist in treating symptoms rather than causes when providing consulting services, with the end result that little changes.

Schaef and Fassel do not provide ready-made answers, and neither do they clearly present causes for addictive behaviours. Their assertion is that the organisation is both another context in which addictive behaviour can occur, as well as the addictive 'substance' itself. Organisational life, they suggest, can become an addiction when it becomes so central to a person's life that they feel life is not possible without it. Schaef and Fassel talk of the promises offered by organisational life – power, status, money, rewards for good performance, recognition etc. It could be seen to offer approval and recognition for people who perhaps have not received these from family or friends, and so it can become the focus of a person's life. However, reward and recognition, and feeling 'part of the family' is based on following organisational 'rules' and on allowing oneself to be 'controlled'. To seek to have one's personal need for approval and recognition met through organisational life, then, could be disappointing, and can be the basis upon which addictive behaviours develop – the search for serenity in a disappointing environment. Schaef and Fassel assert that the organisation becomes the addictive substance when workers become hooked on the promise of the organisational mission and choose not to look at how the system is really operating – actions are excused because of the existence of the 'lofty' mission.

To a degree this analysis may be so – but I wonder if this is necessarily the case in all organisations. Perhaps in some cases individuals will be quite realistic about what the truth is, and will be aware of actions, and their distance from the organisation's mission and values. How does this fit with Schaef and Fassel's suggestion that individuals choose *not* to see the truth? Does this mean that they are not displaying the characteristics of addiction? In organisations where

actions are *not* excused – rather they are noticed and their distance from the organisation's mission and values is discussed in some depth – does this suggest the absence of addiction?

Schaef and Fassel talk of the 'helping' professions having the most difficulty with the promise of the organisational 'mission', and this may be pertinent in the context of this study. Schaef and Fassel describe the existence of the mission statement (e.g. to provide customer-focused services, to act in accordance with equalities principles etc, as messages that many employees will have identified with). When disappointed they suggest that individuals become depressed or exhausted. They suggest that the helping professions 'set themselves up' in that they do not make their statement of purpose realistic – they talk of the grandiosity of the mission as a 'fix' – something which reassures us that we are important and that we do important work. They talk of employees coming to believe in their own lies – as consummate con artists – a flourishing addictive process. This is interesting and provides an explanation for levels of disappointment in organisations, but it would only apply, I suggest, if it is quite obvious that an organisation is lying to itself.

It may be true to say that a genuine belief in the organisation's mission statement will provide people with the reasons for thinking and behaving in the way that they do. Quite the opposite also may be the case – the disappointment resulting from a lack of belief in the mission statement could well provide people with the reasons for thinking and behaving in the way that they do. Whether this results in addictive behaviours is open to question, since it is the opposite of being reassured by a lie.

### The Addictive System

Schaef and Fassel define the word 'system' as an entity which comprises both content (ideas, roles and definitions) and processes (ways of doing things).The

system is made up of parts and the system is larger than the sum of the parts. The system takes on a life of its own which is distinct from the lives of the individuals within it. The system existed before the present employees and will continue to exist after they have left the organisation.

*'Systems contain within themselves entire worldviews. They are internally consistent paradigms and the paradigms are expected to make sense of everything that happens within them. They explain our experience, they validate our actions.....in a closed system, information that cannot be processed within the existing paradigm will not be allowed or recognised..'* (Schaef and Fassel, 1998, p. 60).

Schaef and Fassel remind us that all systems call for behaviours and processes from those within it which are consistent with the system – the unspoken yet accepted 'rules'. The addictive system calls for addictive behaviours in those people who are part of the system, say Schaef and Fassel. To be part of the system we are required to deny certain facts – to stop ourselves from seeing or knowing certain things so that we pose no threat to the continuation of the system. Confusion is also a key characteristic of the addictive system – people spending a great deal of time trying to understand what is going on.

Self-centredness and dishonesty are also highlighted as key characteristics of an addictive system – everything that happens is perceived to be either an affirmation or an assault on the self, and addicts lie to people around them and so create an atmosphere of confusion and dishonesty. Schaef (1988) sets out a range of characteristics of an addict and of an addictive system, such as crisis orientation, depression, stress, abnormal thinking processes, forgetfulness, dependency, negativism, defensiveness, projection, tunnel vision and fear.

The following observations of addictive behaviours, made by Schaef and Fassel, are worthy of further consideration:



- the need to maintain the status quo while creating an illusion of wanting openness, flexibility and change
- the process of invalidation – the defining into non-existence those ideas and experiences that the system does not know or understand, or cannot control
- co-dependent behaviours – collusion to maintain the system which involves dishonest and manipulative behaviour
- dualism – the relegation of a very complex and ambiguous world into two simplistic choices (us and them)

Given the applicability of the models of addictive behaviour and the descriptions of an addictive system, and their similarity to other perspectives on organisational life, some of which have been explored as part of this literature review, we could at this stage argue that not only does addiction theory apply to organisational life but to life in general! To a certain degree both Schaeff and Fassel have done this, in their subsequent writings. Fassel (1990) explores the notion of workaholism and its relationship to addictive organisations, and Schaeff (1987) makes connections between addictive individuals and society, identifying patterns of behaviour consistent with addiction theory and demonstrating the parallels between those behaviours that pervade public, social and political life. She talks of process addictions and provides examples such as the accumulation of money, sex, work, religion, worry etc. She asserts that almost any process as well as substance, can become addictive. The society we live in, she suggests, needs addictions in order to perpetuate itself.

The ease with which addiction theory could be applied to organisational life, as well as to most other aspects of life, raises some difficult questions for me. Whilst comfortable with the notion of habit, I do not believe that it would necessarily help to describe the organisation as an addictive system. The key differences between habit and addiction are found in the basic definitions –

habit is about tendency, custom and practice and addiction is about compulsion and the adverse effects associated with breaking an addiction. If we are to describe this organisation as addictive, then it is necessary to demonstrate that people are compelled to behave in the ways that they do (forced or driven), and that to stop behaving in these ways would have an adverse effect on them and on the system.

## **2.4 Conclusions from the literature**

The literature relating to both culture and climate is somewhat intimidating. Whilst providing possible answers for everything, it is also fair to say that it provides no clear answers. Definitions of climate appear to be, at times, contradictory, and explanations of culture do not refer in much detail to the earlier perspectives on climate. There are distinct similarities between the perspectives on climate and culture, and distinct differences. Climate is perceived to be more malleable than culture, whilst at the same time being described as an indirect determinant of behaviour (affecting attitudes, and subsequent performance and behaviour). Culture is defined as 'the way we do things around here', and at the same time it is acknowledged by writers that there may be many ways of 'doing things around here', in one organisation; suggesting that there may be sub-cultures, and shadow cultures, based on the unwritten or undiscussed ways of operating. This leaves some unanswered questions. When is a 'culture' not a 'culture'? And if, as suggested, a number of diverse cultures can exist within one organisation, then is it reasonable to talk of the organisation as a whole as having no prevailing culture? Is it possible that something else then prevails? The additional determinants of culture/climate exist in other parts of the literature on organisations and organisational behaviour, as well as in broad psychological theories and perspectives. The literature on what makes people 'tick', and then what makes them 'tick' in the organisational setting provides more ways of developing an understanding, whilst at the same time creating, for me, more confusion and raising more

questions. What appeared to be missing from the literature on culture/climate was some explanation about the sequence of development; whether culture always creates climate or whether climate can create culture.

The definition of climate as 'morale' has helped – in examining this organisation I am inclined to believe that the way people *feel* is a direct determinant of their behaviour, and I propose to explore this in some depth in this study, as well as the possibility that this may result in a self-perpetuating problem – a kind of 'vicious circle'.

The literature did not provide me with straightforward ways of understanding why this organisation appears to be stuck; unable to change despite expressing a desire for change. Despite the wide range of perspectives on individuals and their relationships to organisations; the explanations of the differences between culture and climate; the literature on 'frozen' or 'blocked' organisations and the perspectives on addiction which have been applied to organisational life, there appeared to be nothing to explain how a whole organisation can become unable to change, despite expressing a strong desire for change. This inability to change suggests that there is some pervading 'condition' existing within the organisation, and it is my intention to identify this condition, the causes of the condition and the way the condition is sustaining itself.

# Chapter 3

## Deletion, distortion and data collection

### The research method

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## Chapter 3

### Deletion, distortion and data collection

#### The research method

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***'If everything seems to be going well you have obviously overlooked something'***

(Murphy's 6<sup>th</sup> Law)

In this chapter the approach to the research is outlined together with the rationale for selecting this approach. The text will also set out how the researcher's choices were influenced by existing theoretical and philosophical perspectives on research methodology.

#### **3.1 Introduction - the purpose of the research**

As outlined in chapter 1, I began this journey with a series of questions about the organisation I worked for. My questions were borne out of a sense of frustration and a desire to see real and tangible change – both cultural and procedural, and in performance. In my view, and based on my experiences at the time, the organisation was 'stuck' in repeated patterns of behaviour and displayed levels of motivation which were preventing the organisation from effecting real change. The purpose of the research was to find out more about others' views on how the organisation became 'stuck', the nature of its 'stuckness' and obtain clues about how it could become 'unstuck'.

My aim was to undertake research which allowed for the researched to share their feelings, observations and experiences of working in the local authority; in

short I was interested in understanding their perceptions. My knowledge of the organisation's culture and the way it functioned was to be gathered from the experience and insights of the researched, which would be of a personal and subjective nature.

My other major concern was that the researched would be influenced by my hunch that addiction theory applied to this organisation, and would therefore respond accordingly. The purpose of the research was to find out about the organisation and the people in it but without allowing a strong hypothesis (i.e. my own interest in addiction and addictive organisations) to drive the nature and design of the research (and, therefore, possibly, its conclusions).

### **3.2 The researcher's role**

As an employee of the local authority with my own views, feelings and perceptions of the organisation my role as researcher could have been compromised by my emotional engagement with the issues. In planning my research I had to remain aware of my own preconceptions, and I had to ensure that I did not impose my views on the researched. I took a conscious decision to minimise this possibility by applying the Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) meta-model to my interviews. This approach is set out in detail later in this Chapter.

### **3.3 The research methodology – qualitative v quantitative paradigms**

Exploration of the literature on research methods both informed and supported my choices as to the research methodology to be employed.

Creswell's' model (1994:5) clearly sets out the differences between qualitative and quantitative paradigm assumptions. (See figure 2). By adopting a specific

research philosophy or paradigm I was provided with a way of looking at things – a ‘lens’ through which to examine events, people or processes. My choice, initially, was whether to adopt the qualitative or quantitative paradigm.

**Figure 2 – Quantitative and Qualitative Paradigm Assumptions**

<b>Assumption</b>	<b>Question</b>	<b>Quantitative</b>	<b>Qualitative</b>
Ontological	What is the nature of reality?	Reality is objective and singular, apart from the researcher	Reality is subjective and multiple as seen by participants in a study
Epistemological	What is the relationship of the researcher to that researched?	Researcher is independent from that being researched	Researcher interacts with that being researched
Axiological	What is the role of values?	Value-free and unbiased	Value-laden and biased
Rhetorical	What is the language of the research?	Formal, based on a set of definitions, impersonal, use of accepted quantitative words	Informal, evolving decisions, personal voice, accepted qualitative words
Methodological	What is the process of research?	Deductive, cause and effect, context free, static design, generalizations leading to prediction, explanation and understanding. Accurate and reliable through validity and reliability	Inductive process, mutual simultaneous shaping of facts, emerging design – categories identified during research process, context-bound patterns, theories developed for understanding, accurate and reliable through verification.

**Source: Creswell, 1994:5**

*The qualitative paradigm* - it is generally accepted that the adoption of a qualitative paradigm helps the researcher to understand the multiple and

competing realities of people in a particular setting. The intention of qualitative research, argue Locke, Spriduso and Silverman (1987) is to understand a particular social situation, event, role, group or interaction. Miles and Huberman (1984) suggest that it is an investigative process where the researcher gradually makes sense of a social phenomenon. In the qualitative paradigm the researcher enters the informants' world and through ongoing interaction seeks their perspectives and meanings. It is only through this type of immersion that reality can be established. In such instances the researcher assumes an 'emic' mode; they enter the world of those they are observing and seek to live the same experience, frequently becoming a member of that society. Later it is necessary for the researcher to exit that mode and enter the 'etic' mode, where they relay their findings to a wider audience, and in a more objective manner, in order to make the research accessible to those without direct experience. Qualitative research, according to Rossman and Rallis (2003), takes place in the field, relies on multiple methods for gathering data and calls on the researcher to be pragmatic, flexible, politically aware and self reflective. It starts with questions and results in learning. Connolly (1998) suggests that intensive, qualitative research can '*uncover the meaning*' people attach to their own and others' behaviour, and thereby '*begin to unravel the causes of an individual's or a group's behaviour*'. (p.124).

*The quantitative paradigm* - conversely, researchers working in a quantitative paradigm will view the world through a different 'lens', usually to test hypotheses, research questions and objectives within a body of theoretical knowledge. It is a positivist, scientific approach which deals mainly in objective measures which are commonly reported in numerical terms, with the two familiar approaches being surveys and experiments.

Connolly treats quantitative and qualitative research methods as complementary, but he emphasises the value of the latter, asserting that qualitative research can help identify relations of causality. He is clear about the



relative strengths of the two research approaches, but he asserts that while quantitative methods can try to isolate the effects of one variable or another, *'they can never, in the last analysis, conclude with the degrees of certainty associated with qualitative methods that a particular correlation....is a causal one'*. (p.125).

Stake (1995) suggests that the differences are linked to two kinds of research questions. In quantitative studies the research question seeks out a relationship between a small number of variables. Efforts are made to define the variables, to bound the enquiry and to minimise the importance of interpretation until data is analysed – interpretation, he asserts, should not change the course of the study. The example research question he provides demonstrates that a quantitative approach makes clear the boundaries of the study, identifies causal relationships to be tested, and gives clear indications as to the kinds of questions to be asked. However, in qualitative studies, Stake suggests that situational conditions are not known in advance, or controlled. The researcher expects variables to develop in unexpected ways; they will work with multiple realities and they will develop understanding through experience. His example research question is an open one, allowing for issues and variables to emerge.

### Research Analysis - Phenomenologic v Ethnographic Studies

Rossmann and Rallis (2003) describe the differences between phenomenologic and ethnographic studies – phenomenologic studies being open-ended, typically relying on interview data and searching for themes and meaning in the lives of participants.

Through a growing understanding of the 'phenomenon' the researcher is able to develop a sense of what is interesting, and more particularly what is prompting this interest. The researcher may check back with the individual to see if they agree with what has emerged from the interview, and each interview will be

regarded as unique and providing a meaning of its own. Themes will be emergent throughout the process of research, and data can be reorganized into those themes and sub-themes at a later date. The phenomenologic approach, then, is one where the researcher attempts to keep an open mind. This will require a level of self awareness – personally checking and controlling bias and preconceptions. Stake (1995) suggests that whilst subjectivity on the part of the researcher need not be seen as a failing, it is important that the researcher remains aware of his/her shortcomings to avoid weakness in interpretation. A process of triangulation is essential, to avoid subjective misunderstanding, and to test interpretation.

By contrast, ethnographic studies usually begin with broad domains, or categories, for gathering data and then shaping analysis – a balance between structure and openness. It may be, for example, that a researcher is focusing on individuals' views about a specific service, the accessibility of that service and the value of it. In which case she/he can begin the research with 3 categories – the service itself, accessibility and the value of the service. The researcher will then organize their data according to the various data-gathering techniques being used. As the analysis is then undertaken the data will be re-organized into themes, based on the original research questions.

These differences informed my approach to the analysis of my data, which will be explored in more detail in the following chapter.

### Positivist v phenomenological approaches

Positivist approaches are described as the discovery of patterns and laws and the probabilistic generalisation of these patterns (Harre, 1981). In this environment theories are valued for their logical and empirical content and seek to identify the logical consequences that result if they are true. There are limitations to this approach when it is applied by researchers seeking to

understand the behaviours of human beings with all the external factors influencing them, and will be further limited when the researched are in an organisational environment where their behaviours and attitudes are even more difficult to predict and manage. A controlled experiment may well become too limited if it fails to help with the understanding of these behaviours and attitudes.

Harre describes positivism as a retreat from depth to surface and suggests that it shies away from comprehending the complexities and uncertainties of human interaction and behaviours, with its strong urge towards certainty. His viewpoint is representative of the phenomenological stance, and Easterby-Smith *et al* describe the debate as two irreconcilable viewpoints – positivist approaches looking for single objective truths, and phenomenological approaches allowing for reality being flexible, fluid and internally negotiated.

Whilst accepting that these views of positivism and phenomenology are, to some extent, stereotypes, the descriptions and debates informed my decisions regarding my research. I was also influenced by Maslow's (Reason & Rowan, 1981) assertion that the social scientist needs to see the whole person and cannot, therefore, look at people reductively. Rogers (1967) discusses the relationship between the experientialist and the scientist, in his study of client-centred therapy. His assertion that the two are compatible is useful in the context of this study. He asserts that science, as well as therapy, is rooted in the immediate, subjective experience of a person. It is, he says, one part of subjective living. He talks of his own approach to therapy, which is based on a relationship, where feelings and cognition merge into one experience. He talks of participation in the process at the time, rather than observation of the process. However, he also asserts that he is able to abstract himself from the process and observe it, and apply his hunches, which have grown out of the living experience. Rogers remains open to his own experiences and will make use of these experiences in his search for sense. His work accords with my own experiences as a researcher. I was part of the organisation – living the same

experiences as those I was researching. This was both a potential strength and a potential weakness. My challenge was to immerse myself in the situation and to participate in the research process, then to abstract myself, observe the data and begin to apply my hunches. (I have already mentioned my interest in the applicability of addiction theory to this organisation). The adoption of the 'emic' mode; entering and living in the world of the researched, and the exiting and entering the 'etic' mode – using objectivity to analyse the research.

### Choosing the right approach

Although inspired by a genuine curiosity about what made my organisation tick as well as an interest in the possible applicability of addiction theory, my research was not intended to test any particular 'hunch'. Figure 2 -Creswell's model of Quantitative and Qualitative Paradigm assumptions provided me with a reference point against which to ask myself a set of questions and thereby identify the appropriate research methodology.

With regard to the nature of reality, my interest was in establishing 'reality' as seen by the participants, and I had no specific 'truth' or theory to pursue. My relationship with the researched was interactive – I could not claim to be independent from that being researched. My interest was in exploring the experiences and feelings of those being researched and so I was keen to hear about the relationship between their values and their experiences. I intended to invite the interviewees to express personal views, rather than stick to facts. My approach was to be informal accepting the use of metaphor and stories on the part of the researched, as well as allowing for informal conversation as a way of finding out about the organisation.

My research was to be undertaken in the light of my awareness of the likely existence of personal bias and preconceptions. However I did put measures in place to minimise the likelihood of my colluding with or influencing the

respondents (i.e. the NLP 'meta-model'). This approach was informed by Morgan (1983) who warns of the impact of the researcher's own perspective and the need to avoid developing a strong frame of reference which would colour the researcher's judgement.

I was committed to undertaking research which allowed for new perspectives to emerge and which would enable open and dynamic exploration of the issues as presented by the researched, and although interested in whether the addiction model would emerge, it was not my intention to constrain the research, the researcher or the researched by either explicit or tacit reference to this model in undertaking my investigation.

I chose to adopt the qualitative, phenomenological approach to my research, constructing my questions so that patterns, categories and theories would emerge during the process (i.e. an iterative process). This approach would enable me to develop an understanding of the whole person/system, and to establish a non-judgemental, non-evaluative but interactive relationship with those being researched. Maslow (Reason & Rowan, 1981) asserts that the more scientific approach may be too narrow to serve as a general philosophy of research. He talks of the importance of a relationship, or an intimacy, between the researcher and the researched, and he argues for caring objectivity and understanding in order to research more difficult issues.

In this situation, as a member of the organisation I was researching, I assumed an emic mode, in that I was already part of the world of those I was observing and I was living the same experiences.

My study of the data would involve reading and re-reading the transcripts, noting the emergent themes and categorising them. (the phenomenological approach). This would support my desire to analyse the data without a strong or '*a priori*' theory. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). My intention was to develop a sense of

what was interesting through a growing understanding of the phenomenon, and to explore these areas of interest. This analysis will be covered in more depth in the following chapter.

In choosing the above option, I remained conscious of the range of perspectives existing on the strengths and potential weaknesses of qualitative research. Walker (1981) writes persuasively against undertaking qualitative, case study research, and Miles (1979) describes qualitative data as an 'attractive nuisance'. Rossman and Rallis (2003), Stake (1995), Yin (1994) Gomm, Hammersley and Foster (2000), Miles and Huberman (1994) raise issues of subjectivity, interpretation, validity, time and complexity, whilst defending the use of qualitative research to deal with complexity and to identify root causes of unspecified problems. Yin (1994) asserts that the most important application of qualitative research is to explain the causal links in real life situations that are too complex for the survey or experiment.

The debate surrounding the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative research and the persuasive arguments for persisting with it despite the obvious challenges, influenced my approach to undertaking the research and to analysing the data, and the methods I employed will be presented in more detail as part of this thesis.

### **3.4 The research method**

Interviews represent the personal face of data collection, providing the researcher with the opportunity to observe body language, to note hesitations, to take account of nuances of speech and phrase, to follow up leads not followed up by the researched and to take into account other contextual factors.

I chose to conduct standardized and open-ended interviews with the researched, preparing open-ended questions which would be consistently used

from one interview to another, but allowing myself flexibility to go beyond the set questions in order to follow any lead the interviewee may provide, i.e. to allow the interview to be exploratory. Rossman and Rallis (2003) assert that *'the strength of an interview comes from the relevance of the interview questions and from your skill in asking follow-up questions'* (p.185). They state that by asking the interviewee to elaborate on certain points the researcher gives a strong indication of their interest in more than just superficial responses. Follow-up questions will take the interview to a deeper and more detailed level, and *'are a natural part of any conversation'* (Ulin, Robinson, Tolley & McNeill, 2002, p.86). Patton (2002) describes the skill in asking good follow up questions as *'knowing what to look for in the interview, listening carefully to what is said and what is not said, and being sensitive to the feedback needs of the person being interviewed'*. (p. 374).

These questioning and listening skills, whilst being a natural part of any conversation, are of crucial importance in the context of semi-structured, exploratory interviews where themes are emergent.

The skill as described by Patton sits comfortably with the Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) 'meta-model', which talks of the importance of sensory acuity, rapport and active listening as part of effective communication.

Conscious, therefore, of the importance of skilled questioning, as well as the danger of my colluding with or influencing the participants, I was attracted to the NLP meta-model as a possible way of ensuring that my questioning was rigorous and challenging. The use of this model also provided me with a reminder of the importance of observing body language, picking up on tone of voice and, generally, how the interaction feels for the researcher – i.e. sensory acuity. These extra 'clues' enable the researcher to ask follow-up and probing questions, or even to refer directly to a specific piece of body language or to some 'deleted' information.

### 3.5 An Explanation of the NLP Meta-Model

As a Senior Human Resources Development Manager responsible for leadership and management development I had experienced frustration in my job when attempting to create change; to set in place a culture of learning; to challenge people to begin to show leadership in their behaviours and to understand their personal responsibilities to the organisation. I came to the research process with the possibility of a considerable amount of 'baggage'. However, as a professional 'change agent' and someone who was intending to leave the organisation and set up my own business as a management consultant, my genuine interest in this area worked to my advantage, in that I engaged fully with the respondents and established an intimacy and trust conducive to an open and free-flowing conversation.

After conducting 10 interviews and before embarking on more I referred to the NLP meta-model, as developed by Bandler and Grinder (1975) and O'Connor and McDermott (1996) and decided to use the model to attempt to ensure my questioning would go beneath the surface structures of language to the deeper meanings.

#### The definition and origins of the NLP Meta-Model

In this section I provide an account of the NLP meta-model, but first it is necessary to look at the NLP context in which it emerged.

Set out below are some broad definitions of NLP which, if we put them all together, provide some indicators of the field:

*NLP is the study of the structure of subjective experience*



*NLP is an accelerated learning strategy for the detection and utilization of patterns in the world' (John Grinder)*

*NLP is an attitude and a methodology, which leave behind a trail of techniques (Richard Bandler)*

*NLP is the influence of language on our mind and subsequent behaviour*

*NLP is the systematic study of human communication (Alix Von Uhde)*

*NLP is the method for modelling excellence so it can be duplicated*

(Source: O'Connor, J., 2001, p. 2)

The 'Neuro' in NLP acknowledges the fact that we process information about the world neurologically, using the brain and the nervous system, through our five senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. 'Linguistic' refers to the verbal language that we use to communicate to each other, as well as our internal thoughts and our external 'body language'.

'Programming' relates to the 'programmes' or patterns of behaviour we all demonstrate; in other words, the way we organise our thoughts and our behaviour to produce results.

NLP evolved in the early seventies out of the work of John Grinder and Richard Bandler of the University of California. Their work was informed by the work of Fritz Perls, the originator of Gestalt Therapy; Virginia Satir, a family therapist, and Milton Erickson, a hypnotherapist. Grinder and Bandler studied the underlying patterns of behaviours and communication making these therapists so effective in assisting people to change their lives for the better. They also drew on the insights and ideas of many others, including Gregory Bateson, the

writer and thinker on anthropology, cybernetics and communications theory. This work informed the development of a set of models of human skills and behaviours that they called 'Neuro-Linguistic Programming'. – described by O'Connor and McDermott (1996) as the *'the psychology of excellence'*.

### Belief Systems and NLP

O'Connor and McDermott provide a simple explanation of how our belief systems affect what we think and how we act:

*"Our mind, body and spirit meet in our beliefs. What we believe deeply affects what we think and how we act. NLP sees beliefs not in terms of true or false, but in terms of useful or not useful. What are the consequences of your beliefs? What actions flow from them? As we cannot know everything about the world, in many areas our beliefs are simply our best guess at the moment....."* (p.XIII)

This simple explanation sits very comfortably alongside attribution theory (Martinko, 1995), and expectancy-based models of motivation (Vroom, 1964, Porter, L & Lawler E.E., 1968).

O'Connor and McDermott go further to describe the strategies we employ to help us make meaning of the world and which can be both an asset and a liability. They call these *'The Gatekeepers at the Doors of Perception'*. NLP suggests that these 'gatekeepers' transform experience into internal representations. They also transform our internal representations when we use language. First we delete, distort and generalize to make sense of our experience and then our choice of words to describe the experience deletes, distorts and generalises it all over again. O'Connor and McDermott therefore describe spoken language as a map of a map, and thereby two levels away from sensory experience.

### Deletion, distortion and generalization

*Deletion* - human beings select the experiences they remember and delete others, either by discounting them as unimportant or by failing to register them.

*Distortion* – it is possible to change experiences by exaggerating, diminishing or choosing to see them differently.

*Generalization* – it is common practice for us to take certain aspects of our experience as representative of the whole, and pay no attention to exceptions. This enables us to respond to new situations on the basis of what we have learned from similar ones in the past.

These are all ways in which we can fit new experiences into the ways in which we already see the world.

**Figure 3 – A Model of Communication  
(from an NLP perspective)**



Source: Jenny Knight, 2005

## Using the NLP meta-model

The NLP meta-model was the first model developed by Bandler and Grinder (1975), and was designed to demonstrate how deletion, distortion and generalization are used when experiences are translated into language, and then to identify specific questions which can be asked to re-connect experience with language. The meta-model is a series of questions which seek to unravel some of the inevitable selections and distortions in language to clarify communication for both speaker and listener.

John Grinder and Richard Bandler modelled the linguistic skills of Virginia Satir, one of the prime forces behind family therapy; and Fritz Perls, a psychologist and the originator of Gestalt therapy, and combined these with Grinder's research into transformational grammar. They published the results as the meta-model in the book *The Structure of Magic Volume 1* (Science and Behaviour Books, 1975). The term 'meta' means above or beyond – so the meta-model is a model whereby we clarify meaning by getting above the meanings that language is conveying.

The model comprises 13 patterns divided into the three categories: deletion, distortion and generalization. O'Connor (2001) provides examples of language used against each of these patterns together with suggestions about what to listen for and how to recover information which has been left out. I have reproduced the categories and the patterns and have provided my own examples for the reader, which are drawn directly from the research interviews. (See table 1).

**Table 1: The NLP meta-model and the language of the research interview**

<b>Patterns of deletion</b>	<b>Interviewee's assertion</b>	<b>Interviewer's response</b>
Simple deletion	'We don't have the skill...'	'Is there a time when we did have the skill?'
Lack of referential index	'The organisation doesn't value people....'	'Who? What has happened? Specifically?'
Unspecified verb	'Management stifle us'	'How specifically does management stifle you?'
Judgement	'It's obviously the Senior Management Team's responsibility'	'Obvious to whom? Who is making this judgement, and on what grounds?'
Comparison	'He was a better person'	'Compared with? Than what? Against what?'
<b>Patterns of distortion</b>	<b>Interviewee's assertion</b>	<b>Interviewer's response</b>
Nominalization	'We need to improve our communication'	'How could we communicate well with each other?'
Mind reading	'He thinks I'm difficult'	'How do you know?'
Cause and effect	'They make me angry'	'How could <i>they</i> make <i>you</i> angry?'
Complex equivalent	'I'm not closely managed because I'm trusted'	'How does this mean, or lead to, that?'
<b>Patterns of generalization</b>	<b>Interviewee's assertion</b>	<b>Interviewer's response</b>
Modal operator of necessity	'You must complete your WD40 in triplicate...'	'What would happen if we didn't?'
Modal operator of possibility	'The staff can't solve the problem'	'What prevents them? What would happen if they did?'
Universal quantifiers	'Its always been like that'	'Has it ever been different?'

**Source: O'Connor, 2001, and examples from the research interviews**

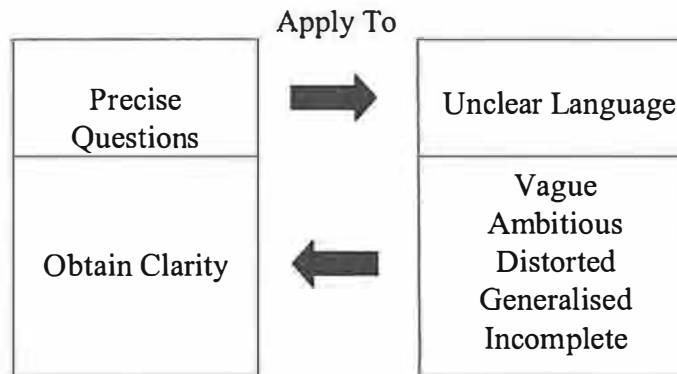
A transcript of a complete interview, including my follow-up questions, is provided in the following chapter.

The meta-model has three main uses in a therapeutic setting:

- it gathers more detailed information by questioning the deletions, e.g. in response to 'they don't listen', 'who exactly doesn't listen? Give me an example of when you haven't been listened to?'
- it clarifies meaning, e.g. by asking 'what do you mean by that?'
- It identifies limitations, particularly in questioning rules expressed by 'ought' or 'can't', and so provides more choices.

In a research interview setting the meta-model offers the prospect of 'critical questioning'. It enables the interviewer to go below the surface structure of the language employed to the deeper structure. It thereby enables the interviewer to get closer to the ways in which the interviewees make sense of their personal experience (see figure 4 for a visual representation of the use of the meta- model).

**Figure 4 – the Communications Meta-Model**



Source: Jenny Knight, 2005

Early on in the interview process I was struck by the intensity of the interactions as well as by the richness of the information and the powerful use of metaphor by interviewees. My concern to avoid colluding with the interviewees became paramount at the same time as a developing interest in the possibility of high levels of deletion, distortion and generalization on the part of interviewees. This initial reaction prompted me to re-visit the research literature, specifically those skills regarding the use of follow-up questions, as described by Patten (2002), and with reference to the Principles of Good Practice (Rossman and Rallis, 2003), namely:

- comfort with ambiguity
- capacity to make reasoned decisions and to articulate the logic behind those decisions
- deep interpersonal or emotional sensitivity

- ethical sensitivity of potential consequences to individuals and groups
- perseverance and self-discipline
- awareness of when to bring closure

I was also struck by the interviewees' own use of the term 'therapeutic' as a way of describing the interviews process, and this reminded me of the origins of the NLP model. By comparing the research literature on interviewing skills and good practice in qualitative research with the NLP beliefs and methodology I was able to identify a great deal of common ground – both in terms of what is recommended as good practice and in terms of the necessity to develop robust and thorough questioning techniques to ensure that the possibility for deletion, distortion and generalization is diminished. The NLP meta-model provided me with a 'tool' for critical questioning, as well as a set of underpinning principles (i.e. the operating principles) to ensure that I approached each interview in a positive and open frame of mind. Subsequently the model both supported and informed my analysis of the interview data and this will be explored in more detail in the following chapters.

### **3.6 The researched**

I originally e-mailed 100 individuals inviting them to participate in the research. These individuals were chosen using organisational structure charts, to ensure that a mix of people from different departments with different responsibilities and differing status within the hierarchy were invited to participate. The following e-mail was sent to all possible participants:

*I am currently studying for a PhD at the University of....., and am focusing on the culture and performance of .....Council, in an effort to find out more about what makes this organisation 'tick'. I am hopeful that this work will contribute to the formulation of a comprehensive organisational development strategy for the authority.*



*Would you be willing to contribute to my research by giving me approximately an hour of your time (at your convenience) to be interviewed about your views and experiences of working here? **All interviews will remain confidential, and interviews will only be taped with your agreement.***

*Please would you let me know if you are willing to take part in this research by responding to this e-mail within the next 10 working days, i.e. by .....*

*If you have any questions about the nature and purpose of my research please do contact me on extension.....*

*Thank you in advance for your help.*

*Jenny Knight*

*Ext ....*

I received 83 responses via e-mail, all agreeing to participate, and none asking for more information. Only one person telephoned me and said that they did not wish to participate, saying that they did not feel comfortable about being interviewed, given their position within the authority (they were a senior manager). The final list of interviewees was compiled from a possible list of 83 willing participants.

Fifty interviewees were chosen from the list and interviews were carried out over a 5 month period, from November 2001 to March 2002, with staff from across the organisation. The final 50 were chosen taking a 'diagonal slice' as opposed to a 'vertical slice' (i.e. employees from all levels and across all departments in the organisation, and not from just one or two departments or areas). The number of individuals interviewed from each department was calculated in proportion to the size of the department, and I attempted, as far as possible, to

distribute levels and types of responsibility across departments. This would ensure that respondents came to the research process with different experiences, based on their roles and status within the organisation. I referred to staff structure charts to ensure that as far as possible a representative sample of employees would be interviewed. Appendix 1 provides a breakdown of the sample group. Some of the respondents knew me and others had never met me before. No elected councillors were interviewed.

During the early stages of conducting the interviews I was open to the possibility of setting up focus groups, having completed the interview process. This would have provided me with a more than one source of evidence or measure of the same phenomenon. However, as the research progressed the responses during the interview process were strikingly similar, despite my application of the NLP meta-model as a critical questioning process. After some 30 interviews I could reasonably predict what respondents would say. I took the decision that the data I was collecting did not require corroboration because all respondents held broadly the same views, but that time and effort should be placed in the triangulation of interpretation. From a practical perspective I anticipated difficulty in undertaking research once I had left the organisation, and so worked hard to complete the research before my leaving date.

#### Why no elected councillors?

I took the decision not to involve local councillors for a number of reasons.

My decision was, amongst other things, informed by the work of Seidman (1998), who talks of the effect of power on interview relationships. The issues highlighted are subtle and are difficult to navigate – however, the key questions for me, in deciding whether to interview elected members, were:

- would issues of power and differing agendas/experiences make it difficult to gather useful data? I.e. would elected members organize their experiences differently from officers in the Council? My view was that, given the context, this would be the case, and that it may be difficult for me to make sense of members' responses as opposed to those of paid officers.
- Would the open-ended questions be applicable and relevant to elected members? It was highly likely that they would not, for many elected members, who see themselves as having a different relationship with the Council than staff.

The role and priorities of local councillors relate to the performance of what was called the 'political function' by the late Sir Lawrence Boyle, a key member of the Widdicombe Committee:

*'All governments, be they central or local, have a two-fold function to perform. They have the service function and the political function. The service function consists of the provision of those goods and services which for one reason or another are supplied through the public sector. The political function, on the other hand, is the management and reduction of the conflict which arises out of the issues involved in the public provision of goods and services. It embraces such questions as the scope, the scale and the quality of the public services and the manner in which their costs should be met. And it should be noted that it is easier in fact to remove the service function from local government than it is to remove the political function. Because the service function, as we know, can always be privatised, but the political function cannot and should not be delegated. If the political function is removed from local government, it ceases to be local government'. (Boyle, 1986, p.33)*

Whereas the predominant role of the local government employee is to implement policies and to provide services for local residents – to perform the ‘service function’ as described by Boyle (above), Boyle also raises the issue of the perceived importance of the political function as opposed to the fragility of the service function.

The role and motives and of the elected councillor are likely to be different from those of the local government employee. Wilson and Game (2002) describe the aims and purposes of the job of a councillor thus:

- *To represent and be accountable to the electorate....*
- *In formulating policies and practices for the Authority.....*
- *Monitoring their effectiveness.....*
- *Providing leadership for the community. (p.244)*

The motives for becoming an elected councillor will undoubtedly differ from those for becoming an employee of the local authority. Whilst receiving allowances, councillors could not claim to earn a living from local politics. Many local politicians hold down full or part-time posts whilst serving the community as an elected councillor. It can be assumed, then, that most local councillors are seeking to influence the planning and development of their local environment and to get a good deal for the local community. The activities they undertake are likely to provide them with a sense of personal satisfaction.

The local government workforce comprises approximately one hundred times as many employees of councils as there are elected councillors (Wilson and Game, 2002). Roles and responsibilities are diverse - housing officers, administrative officers, policy officers, communication and marketing managers, social workers, teachers, education welfare officers, refuse collectors, solicitors, accountants, community development officers, leisure and tourism officers, auditors, HR managers, training officers, to name a few. Whereas a large proportion of

employees will be contracted to deliver specific services, as defined by policies and procedures (either internal or legislative), others will be attempting to exercise professional influence over politicians – providing support and advice where necessary. They will also be representing the interests of the authority, and will be managing staff and resources.

The motives for working within local government vary, according to the role and responsibilities of the individual. It can safely be assumed that some employees work for the organisation simply for their salary, and are not engaged in the political agendas that will dominate the working lives of others. This is in marked contrast to the elected councillor, who should be making decisions based on his/her role as representative of the local community.

The psychological contract undoubtedly applies to employees of the organisation, but is likely to be very different for elected councillors. Mullins (1999) sets out a range of expectations of rights, duties, obligations and privileges which do not form part of any formal agreement but which have a significant impact on relationships and behaviours within an organisation. His examples include:

- the provision of safe and hygienic working conditions
- job security
- challenging and satisfying jobs
- genuine participation in decision making
- personal development and career progression
- consideration and understanding about personal problems

For most elected councillors these expectations do not apply, and so their view and experiences of the organisation will be from a very different perspective.

My conclusion, therefore, was that to interview local councillors as part of my research would produce distorted results, since the base from which they are operating is fundamentally different to that of salaried officers. The perspectives, views, visions and motivation of the latter, which is a focal part of this thesis, must be different from those of volunteer community leaders.

Elected councillors did not, in my view, represent the current culture, although I was open to the possibility of it emerging that they would have a significant influence on the prevailing culture.

### Keeping a record

No interviews were taped. When I initially asked permission to interview individuals I asked for their permission to record the conversations. The overwhelming response was negative, some respondents saying that they would be taped, but that they felt nervous about their own personal/professional security. On receiving this response I decided not to pursue with recording any interviews, and to take notes, being sure to share with the respondents what I was writing during the interview. The fact that participants were unwilling to be taped is a material part of this story, and provided me with a strong clue as to the state of the organisation even before the interviews were undertaken. In undertaking the interviews, I wanted to get to the heart of the problem. I did not want the interviewees to hold back, which taping the interviews might have encouraged.

### **3.7 The research questions**

Interviews were standardized and open-ended, as described by Rossman and Rallis (2003), with each interviewee being asked the same set of open-ended questions in the same order if possible. (On occasions it was necessary to revisit a question or to leave one out where a respondent had clearly dealt with it

during the conversation). My approach was to allow the interviewee to respond to the open-ended questions and then to follow the direction of the conversation by exploring issues in more depth and allowing them to offer more examples, or allowing them to set their own direction by active, non-judgemental listening (using such skills as reflecting back, summarising). Before moving on to the next open question, I read my notes to the respondents and asked for their verification and agreement. The questions asked of each interviewee were:

- What is it like for you working here?
- What, if anything, do you think is the organisation's problem?
- What is your relationship with/contribution to this problem?
- What makes you happy working here?
- What makes you unhappy?
- When you are unhappy how do you get through your working day?
- What do you think needs to happen in this organisation?

Each interview lasted, on average, 1.5 hours, and interviews were carried out in quiet offices or off-site, having made prior arrangements with the individual concerned.

Having completed the first 10 interviews I invited the interviewees to comment on the questions asked and on their experience of the interview process. (This approach was informed by the phenomenological approach to analysis as described earlier in this chapter). Comments received were very positive, some interviewees describing their experience as *'therapeutic'*. Two respondents said that they had valued the time to reflect on themselves and the organisation, and three individuals sent me articles and references after their interview – specifically relating to organisations, organisational cultures and leadership and management. Schein (1985) suggests that organisational research of any sort is an intervention, and so reminds us that the ethics of research should first of all

be the ethics of intervention. With this in mind, having completed these first 10 interviews, I allowed myself time to reflect on the process to far.

At this point I felt comfortable with the open-ended questions I was using – they were eliciting a great deal of information, but I was extremely conscious of the need to strengthen my skills in asking follow-up and probing questions. The data I was gathering was powerful and, in some cases, I found myself in danger of assuming that I knew what the interviewees were trying to tell me – particularly when individuals were using metaphor as a way of describing their experience of working in the organisation. Cazal and Inns (1998) describe the use of metaphor as showing how events can be perceived and interpreted in multiple ways according to various associations made, which renders meaning hard to grasp. Metaphor allows for, and draws attention to, ‘the proliferation of meaning’ in language. (Sarup, 1993).

As a member of the organisation I was researching (I left the council in March 2001, having undertaken all the fieldwork) I was living the same experiences, and so it would have been easy and reassuring for me to believe that that my perceptions were being articulated by the researched. Metaphor is open to interpretation, and so I had to ensure that my questioning would elicit the meaning of the metaphor for the interviewee, and that my own interpretations would not dominate. (The data will be explored in detail in the following chapter). At this point in the process I chose to apply the NLP meta-model to all subsequent interviews, seeing it to as a tool for critical questioning and a way of avoiding collusion with the interviewees.

### **3.8 Validity and reliability**

The reliability of the research depended on methods of ‘quality control’ (Goetze and LeCompte, 1984). Relevant queries as set out by Miles and Huberman (1994) informed my approach to ensuring reliability, namely:



- the clarity of the research questions
- the importance of the research design being congruent with the questions
- the need to clarify the researcher's role and status within the site
- the need to specify the relationship of the data to theoretical perspectives
- the importance of collecting data across a range of appropriate settings, times and respondents
- the usefulness of peer or colleague review

The choice of method was made in the light of the kinds of questions I was seeking answers to, as set out earlier, and details have been provided regarding the sample group. In the following chapter information is provided about my relationship with the researched and my role, history and status within the organisation. The reader is also provided with detailed information about the use of peers and colleagues to triangulate interpretation of the data.

The validity of the process is about the findings making sense or being credible. Miles and Huberman provide some useful questions which have helped me to consider the validity of the data, for example:

- are the descriptions context rich and meaningful?
- does the account 'ring true'?
- did the research method or methods produce generally converging conclusions?
- have alternative explanations been actively considered?
- were the conclusions considered to be accurate by original informants?

Conducting semi-structured interviews, using open-ending questions resulted in long and complex transcripts which needed checking for accuracy before any analysis could be undertaken. As well as continuing to ask participants to comment on the interview process and applying the NLP meta-model to remove

bias from the interviewing process, I transcribed the notes from a sample of 20 respondents and these notes were sent to them, confidentially, for their comments. Some of these notes were transcribed because the individuals' responses were so powerful, and I wanted to make sure they had the opportunity to think again about some of their statements. (This was directly related to my own concern that I may have influenced the interviewees in some way). Others were chosen at random. This action was taken with reference to the phenomenological approach to research.

I asked the following questions of these interviewees:

- Does what you said still ring true?
- Has anything changed to make you see things differently? If so, what?
- Are there any glaring inadequacies or omissions in my record of the interview with you?
- Is there anything you'd like to add or change?

The interviewees were reassured of confidentiality at this point.

Comments were received from 12 of the 20 interviewees, and these comments ranged from confirmation of the accuracy to humorous responses to what they had written – for example one person responded by saying

*'I wasn't there when I said that...'*

and another individual commented

*'My God, did I just rant and rave like that all the time?... You must have got me on a bad day!...'* and then went on to say that their sentiments remained the same.

As well as confirming the accuracy of the data these subsequent comments strengthened my belief that I had identified patterns of response and key issues accurately.

Later in this thesis, as the data is examined in the light of a range of theoretical perspectives, alternative explanations will be considered as part of the journey to the conclusions to this study.

**Chapter 4**  
**My part in the system**  
**The researcher and the researched**

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## Chapter 4

### My part in the system

#### The researcher and the researched

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***'I have no data yet. It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories instead of theories to suit facts'.***

(Sherlock Holmes)

#### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will describe my initial reactions to both the interview process and to the data, as well as my attempts to rigorously check my initial responses and interpretation of the data. This could easily have been affected by my own experiences and my perceptions of the organisation. These experiences are shared with the reader in this chapter. I had started the research in a state of frustration, wondering why the organisation was, in my view, so unable to change for the better. Much of this frustration was based on my own recent experiences, and was initially driven more by a desire to work in a 'better' organisation than by the recognition of the importance of improving organisational performance. The state of the organisation was what I wanted to understand – so my experiences led me to this work. I too was frustrated by my organisation, and I wanted it to change. My personal biography could well have influenced the research. It would have been easy to ask leading questions, to hear what I wanted to hear and to twist facts to suit theories. I was conscious of my part in the system whilst conducting the interviews, and I was aware, having completed the interviews, that although I had several hundred pages of

notes, I was not immediately in the position of being able to draw any conclusions. My reflections on my relationship with the researched, the 'baggage' I brought to the process, the underlying purpose of my research and the effect I may have on the process were crucial to ensuring a robust approach.

## **4.2 Reflexivity**

Rossmann and Rallis describe reflexivity as 'looking at yourself making sense of how someone else makes sense of their world' (p. 49). Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) assert

*'There is no way in which we can escape the social world in order to study it. Put simply, a relationship always exists between the researcher and those being researched'* (Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) p.15)

As a researcher within my own organisation, I have been helped by the perspective expressed by Delamont (1992) who suggests that qualitative researchers cannot control reflexivity and achieve objectivity, and cannot eliminate bias from the research process. Her view is that researchers should recognise the existence of reflexivity in social interactions and should focus on understanding its effects. She cautions us to be 'constantly self-conscious' about our roles and interactions as researchers, and about our theoretical and empirical material as it accumulates. Delamont suggests that '*as long as qualitative researchers are reflexive, making all their purposes explicit, then issues of reliability and validity are served*'. (p. 8).

## **4.3 Personal experience**

I have provided the reader with some information about my role in the organisation, and now propose to expand on this and to share my experiences and my feelings at the time of undertaking the research.

I was significantly affected by local government re-organisation in 1997, as an employee who would have to apply for their own post. The post which best matched what I had been doing was not advertised until March 1997 – in April 1997 the new authority would exist. At this stage in the recruitment process I was acutely aware of the limited options available to me should I be unsuccessful in securing the post. Between September 1996 and April 1997 staff in all three organisations had been working for what was termed ‘the shadow authority’, i.e. individuals were ‘in between’ – neither working for their own organisation or officially for the new one. My role was to provide training and development, and I was asked to provide recruitment training for managers from all three organisations (supporting them, once they had secured jobs for themselves, in the process of recruiting to the new organisation) as well as training for managers and staff who were applying for new posts in the unitary authority. This training was called ‘Getting the Job You Want’.

The small training team (comprising two training managers and 2 administrative officers) was moved into new accommodation and left to get on with this work, as well as offering a more general menu of training and development for staff. During this time of change, training and development ceased to be an organisational priority – the only service we provided were the two training programmes as outlined above, and outplacement support (i.e. support for managers who were taking voluntary redundancy and who needed help in planning for their futures). The need for this was great – large numbers of individuals attended the ‘Getting the Job You Want’ training – so many wanted it that we were running several courses each week. During this programme I saw individuals in tears, afraid for their future. In response to requests, I also spent time on a one-to-one basis with a number of individuals, some of whom were extremely worried and distressed. These individuals wanted personal coaching which would help them secure a post in the new organisation. Some were successful, others were not, and I felt a degree of personal responsibility

when individuals failed to secure employment. Very few of those who were successful in securing employment in the new authority thanked the training team for our support. Our own manager spent a minimal amount of time with us – she was working to secure her own position in the new authority. The rest of the personnel team were placed elsewhere, focusing on the harmonisation of terms and conditions across the three organisations.

My own experience was one of feeling abandoned and unsupported. My colleague and I worked hard to support each other, but our relationship was put under strain because we knew we may have to compete with each other for posts within the new authority. We finally decided not to compete, but to wait for the structure to be published and then to reach an agreement together about who would apply for what. I was unclear as to the timetables for recruitment – I knew, however, that the longer it took for the new training and development structure to come out, the less choice was available to me. During this period there were, for me, times of acute loneliness – everybody seemed to be looking after themselves – we were not looking after each other. (Although at the time I felt strongly that I was doing my fair share of looking after other people by providing the training and support services).

In late March 1997 I secured a post in the new authority, (the one I had agreed to apply for) and my colleague secured the other post. I was moved into an open plan, over-crowded office with a new team of colleagues, many of whom I had never met before and with a new manager with whom I had never worked and who had her own ideas about my role in the new authority. My colleague (and, by this time, very close friend) was moved to another building – we were no longer working together. I found myself working alongside a disaffected individual who did not want the post she had managed to secure in the new authority, feeling that she had taken a drop in status. She shared her anger with me on our first day of working together. These first few weeks were very difficult, and I felt physically ill, as well as very unhappy. My view at the time



was that I had played a central role in supporting the organisation through the change process, and that I had been left to get on with this with no support or acknowledgement.

The outcome of the whole change process was, for me, negative. Although I still had a job, I had lost some good friends and colleagues along the way (particularly the individual I had worked alongside in the 'shadow' authority, who was now working in a different building), I had received no thanks for my work in the run-up to re-organisation, and I now had a new manager who knew nothing about me and appeared to place little value on anything I had previously done.

Despite my own disappointment I was acutely aware that I had done better than many as a result of the reorganisation. At least I had a job, and it was still in organisational development. Many people around me (i.e. sitting on desks just in front of or behind me) had found themselves demoted, and on protected salaries. Prior to reorganisation, these people had held positions as senior managers, and were now operating at the same level as me (although earning the same salary as before, for a period of three years). These circumstances did not make the establishment of new relationships easy.

However, the fact that there were approximately 30 of us in an open plan, crowded and badly designed office soon ensured that we provided each other with support, and talked through our problems and experiences together. After a while I began to enjoy going to work again, because of the new relationships I had established, and because I was setting a new direction for myself at work.

During the next four years the structure of the organisational development team was changed three times, as was my role. My job (Senior HR Development Manager responsible for leadership and management development) was evaluated and my salary kept low – after a lengthy battle with my manager and with the personnel section, I succeeded in earning the same amount of money

as a colleague of mine who was responsible for staff development (this is the individual with whom I had worked during the run-up to re-organisation, and with whom I had made the 'bargain'). Decisions appeared to me to be unfair, unclear and, quite often, mistakes. (Evidenced by mini-restructures, changes of management and changes of mind). No-one seemed to know what we were supposed to be doing and why.

Things improved slowly over the next four years, despite the regular changes. My colleagues and I established strong relationships, the team were moved to better accommodation, I found myself working alongside the individual I had been separated from, I became clearer about my own role and contribution and I learned to 'do my own thing'.

During this time I decided to set up a business of my own, cut down my working hours and see where the future took me. My experiences within the organisation undoubtedly affected my decisions about my future, but they were not the drivers for making personal changes. What influenced me most was a new set of experiences – people from outside the organisation asking me to do work for them, and my realisation that there was a possible alternative to my remaining an employee – of this or any other organisation. I took a long time to finally make the decision to give up my job and work for myself, and my delay in taking this decision was related to matters of financial security, rather than a loyalty to my organisation. This was a time of ambivalence – liking the organisation for the people and the security, and feeling nostalgic for the way things used to be, and disliking the organisation for its lack of direction, and for what I felt it had done to me.

#### **4.4 Personal feelings**

At the time of embarking on the research for this study I had taken the decision to leave the organisation, and was excited about my future. I had established a good reputation in the new authority and was confident in my skills and abilities.

I had been disappointed with the standard of management in the new authority, however, and had been given no opportunity to apply for the management of my own service, because of complications involving potential redundancy. My feelings were mixed, then – a part of me was still able to strongly identify with the anger and disappointment expressed by the respondents, and another part of me wondered why they didn't do something about it. I had carefully planned to leave the organisation having secured a future for myself as a freelance consultant, and so I may have been inclined towards judging people against my own experience. This mix of empathy and impatience with participants confused me in the early stages of the research, but the use of the meta-model to ensure a critical questioning process, as well as the adoption of a range of methods of triangulation, helped me to remain aware of my part in the system and contemplate the data with care.

My rigorous approach to questioning was described by some individuals as 'challenging'. However, many respondents stated that they had enjoyed the process and valued the time to reflect. All respondents were open and willing to talk – many offered further help and support by providing me with references and articles.

My initial concern was that I would find myself agreeing with the interviewees and that consequently the research I undertook would merely reinforce my own perceptions of the organisation. However, after approximately 30 interviews, I surprised myself by having a very different reaction to what I was hearing than the one I expected. This reaction was one of impatience with the respondents. I began to feel that I could predict what would be said, and that the respondents were somehow 'at fault'. It was, at the time, hard to articulate what my frustration was – but I kept notes of my reflections, which I made at the time of undertaking the interviews, and these are some examples of those written reflections:

*'What bargain was made, explicitly? What did these people think it was going to be like, and why? Is this grown up thinking? Is it deletion, distortion and generalisation?*

*'Who said the organisation should be caring etc?*

*'Games exist as long as there are players'*

*'The values of the organisation are what are and not what should be'.*

These comments illustrate a sense of frustration emerging in me about the choices I perceived people to be making. What was becoming clear was that the belief systems described by O'Connor and McDermott (1996) – the belief systems I was trying to ensure I probed with interviewees by the use of the NLP meta-model in my questioning were proving extremely hard to change/challenge.

It seemed to me that people were choosing to see things in a certain way, and that they were unwilling to see things in any other way, or indeed change, despite enjoying talking about their situation and their desire for things to be different.

The process of challenging myself to be rigorous in my questioning and in my analysis had highlighted a problem for me – it seemed clear to me at the time that the respondents had, somehow, learned ways of perceiving things and had learned certain responses. These learned perceptions and learned responses seemed to me to exist for all 50 respondents, and were strikingly similar, but were expressed very differently – indeed it occurred to me that whatever it was that the respondents believed had not been articulated clearly in the interviews – rather it had been represented through the use of metaphor, simile, story-telling and subjective emotion. Whatever was at the heart of the matter was not

immediately obvious from the information gathered via the interviews. Taking the advice of Miles and Huberman (1994) I had dug into metaphors in the hope of finding more meaning, more explanation, using the meta-model. In most cases, to my frustration, none had been forthcoming.

The challenge for me was to continue with the interviews with rigour and to suspend all judgement pending a deep analysis of the data, whilst at the same time 'logging' my own reactions and revisiting them as part of the process of analysis. This dual approach was crucial in analysing the system, my part in the system and the effect that the system was having or had had on me. In short, my own reactions informed the process by which I undertook the analysis of the data.

#### **4.5 Familiarizing myself with the data**

Rossmann and Rallis (2003) recommend repeated reading of the data, and the use of tools to organise the data, such as note cards, magic markers, post-it notes etc. Use of these recommended techniques, as well as converting each interview from hand written notes to typed records provided me with new insights and leads.

With reference to the advice set out by Rossmann and Rallis, my approach was to re-produce the data in a more organised form, using the questions as 'categories' and identifying key quotes which accurately reflected the general response to each question. Methods such as identifying key themes (e.g. change – which will be explored in detail later) were useful and undertaken using simple but effective methods – specifically highlighter pens, word counts, post-its. This enabled me to produce a shortened but more focused version of the data, which is set out in the following chapter, but this was only possible after several sessions of reading the data, noting down 'hunches' and allowing my thinking to be shaped and refined over a period of time. This method is

described by Miles and Huberman (1994) as 'eyeballing' the data in an exploratory way.

The limitations of 'analyst-constructed' categories

Rossmann and Rallis (2003) highlight the importance of allowing indigenous categories to emerge – i.e. those categories expressed by the participant – discovered by the researcher through the use of language or metaphor by participants.

I was aware that emic perspectives would not necessarily emerge neatly, via the questions – respondents would make sense of their experiences in unstructured, unpredictable ways and could not be relied on to answer a question with the relevant answer. Indeed, their views would be expressed how and when they wanted and my experience told me that information had emerged which did not fit neatly under any one of my questions. The use of probing questions had not solved this problem, and so I was conscious that, having produced this first summary of the data, further analysis techniques were necessary.

#### **4.6 Triangulation of interpretation of the data**

Methods of triangulation involved *member checking* (Stake, 1995), i.e. the researched examining drafts of writing where their words are featured, to check for accuracy and palatability; *investigator triangulation*, i.e. showing the data to an independent and experienced researcher (as suggested by Denzin, 1989) engaging in a third party/shadow consultancy process (it would be reasonable to consider this a method of *theory triangulation*, according to Denzin's (1989) definition; *eyeballing* (Rossmann and Rallis, 2003), *counting* (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

#### **4.7 Member Checking**

A description of this process has been provided in chapter 3, together with examples of responses. The result of this process was positive for me, in that all those who responded to the exercise either confirmed the accuracy of the data, tried to provide more detailed explanations against what they had originally said (but no-one contradicted their original response), or joked (in a somewhat embarrassed way) about the strength of their response. Where interviewees had expressed very strong, almost 'over the top' opinions about the organisation, I considered the possibility that I had somehow produced that response in the person, and so I chose to send these individuals a transcript of what they had said, so that they had the opportunity to change things. They did not change anything.

#### **4.8 Investigator triangulation**

Having completed the research and typed up the responses I e-mailed the data to two associates, both of whom had undertaken academic research and both of whom had no knowledge of the organisation in question. I asked them to read the responses and let me have their views and any questions for me to consider. Their responses were interesting – their questions suggested that they too found the data confusing, which at the time was comforting for me. For example, both associates commented on the contradictory nature of the data; i.e. that the organisation was perceived as bad, but that the people were described as 'wonderful', 'talented etc. The issue of lack of personal responsibility for the situation was also highlighted by the associates. At this stage I did very little with their responses except reflect on the data and on my own feelings about the data.

#### 4.9 Third party/'shadow' consultancy

Approximately 6 weeks after completing the research I engaged in a process of challenging my own perspectives, responses and feelings by drawing on the third party or 'shadow' consultancy model. Conscious of the possibility of my role as a researcher being compromised as a result of my relationship with and experiences of the organisation I decided to use the skills of a colleague who operated as a freelance consultant.

This individual was able to take a third party stance, i.e. she had specific expertise as a consultant but was not positioned within the system in question – i.e. the local authority. Block (2000) asserts that the strength of any third party intervention, whatever its form, is objectivity. Third parties offer an independent point of view, an outlook that is not coloured by being so much part of a culture that they cannot see it in a new way. The individual I worked with had no knowledge or experience of the organisation in question and so was able to explore the data with me with objectivity – this enabled me to 'check' my own reactions and assumptions. Tosey and Gregory (2002) describe 'shadow consultancy' as a form of practitioner supervision that utilizes the principle of parallel process. Schroder (1974) describes it thus:

*'The term shadow consultant denotes a consultant who, at the request of a colleague and by means of a series of mutual discussions in which he uses a socio-scientific approach, helps evaluate and, if necessary, change the diagnostic, tactics or role adopted in a certain assignment'.*  
(p. 580)

I spent time with the third party/shadow consultant exploring the data, discussing and analysing my own feelings about the organisation and identifying themes and questions. This process was undertaken with regard to the need for



confidentiality – no information was shared which would identify individuals or, indeed, explicitly identify the organisation. Denzin's (1989) description of theory triangulation fits reasonably well with this approach, in that he suggests that by choosing reviewers from alternative theoretical viewpoints we will develop a stronger understanding of the phenomenon. To the extent that the reviewer and the researcher agree on meaning, then the interpretation is triangulated. The third party involved in this process came from a different working background and had alternative perspectives on organisational life, based on her own studies and her work as a consultant.

The process lasted approximately two hours, and during this time the shadow consultant asked me to tell them about the organisation; the reason for my research; the research method and the data. I found the process frustrating – when asked why I had to admit to being angry with the respondents, but I did not know why. A result, perhaps, of trying to make some sense of the data in an objective way whilst *feeling* that I understood? Also, perhaps, because of my personal 'baggage'? At the time I reflected on the possibility that what I was sharing with the 'shadow' consultant (the views and feelings as expressed by the interviewees) were in fact also my views and feelings.

The combination of a belief that I understood what the participants were trying to tell me, and my subsequent struggle to avoid making assumptions about something so close to me, and the reminder (through the research process) of my own experiences made the 'shadow' consultancy process very powerful for me. It helped me to reflect on my own feelings, my relationship with the researched and the importance of remaining, for as long as possible, open-minded about what I had learned. For the reader's information, I left the council in March 2002, and the shadow consultancy process was carried out in May 2002.

A range of questions were raised by the shadow consultant as a result of an exploration of my experiences and views, and of the data. These questions were recorded by me, and they undoubtedly influenced the development of the questions I have used to analyse the interview responses.

#### **4.10 'Eye-balling'**

This method has been discussed earlier – sitting with the data, reading it and re-reading it, letting it incubate, reviewing it in as many ways as possible, living with it, talking about it, getting to know it intimately (in my case to the point where I could recall exactly who said what, and what number they were in the sequence of interviews). I found myself discussing the data with strangers on buses, plumbers, people at parties and practically anyone who would listen. The time invested in developing this familiarity was invaluable, although new puzzles emerged as a result (as predicted by Stake, 1995).

#### **4.11 Counting**

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that a lot of counting goes on in the background when judgements are being made about themes or patterns. When identifying themes the researcher is conscious of the number of times a thing happens or is discussed – the judgements about themes are based on counting. The researcher decides which particulars exist more often or matter more than others, or go together. In qualitative research, then, the researcher is sometimes counting.

My hunch was that there were key themes emerging from the data – e.g. change, and so I counted the use of key words. By familiarising myself with the data I began to detect similarities and themes. By counting words, and then re-examining how these words were used, I was able to develop a clearer picture

of, for example, the dominant perspective on change. The word 'change' was used more than any other significant word (one which suggested a theme). More information on this is provided in the following chapter.

Once I had confirmed dominant themes by counting, I could then turn my attention to the range of views expressed on this theme, and identify the key issues. This process of deep analysis takes place in Chapter 6.

#### **4.12 Conclusion – emerging questions**

Having completed all 50 interviews and having given myself space to reflect and engage in the processes of triangulation described above, a series of key questions emerged for me. These questions are reproduced from my own notes kept after the research process, and they have informed my detailed analysis of the data. They were not planned or constructed with a specific purpose in mind – they were a result of a thinking process.

- Is the culture of the organisation a direct result of the continual change?
- Why is it that respondents are only able to focus on their 'hygiene factors' and seem unable to reach higher levels of motivation?
- How much are we feeding our own problem, by acting out negative behaviours, by disengaging rather than challenging and by projecting all the problems onto others?
- Is it all really a problem, given that no-one seems to be doing anything about it?
- Are we choosing to see things in a particular way because it makes it unnecessary for us to actually think?
- Where does the responsibility for change lie?

The fact that they emerged for me in an unsystematic way (i.e. as a natural human response) was, for me, a strong reason to take notice of them. Blumer

(1969) states that human beings use questioning, listening, looking and reading as skills in everyday life in order to establish, maintain, negotiate, verify and participate in everyday events. These activities are *'part of the psychology of perception, and, as such, they are a tacit part of the everyday functioning of individuals as they negotiate the events of daily life'* (Evertson & Green, 1986, p. 163). The process of observation, asking questions, listening and reading more deliberately and systematically applies to the process of learning something new.

According to Rossman and Rallis (2003) what differentiates systematic qualitative enquiry from the everyday activities of questioning, listening, looking and reading as ways of learning is purpose and discipline. My decision, then, in attempting to undertake a deep and systematic analysis of the data, was to use the original questions which emerged naturally and as a straightforward human response to the data, but to be open to de-constructing these questions and identifying further questions to be addressed. The questions in their current form imply some level of knowledge on my part, and this was worth exploring in the context of the research. What assumptions was I making in asking these questions, and why was I making them? Was I twisting facts to suit my theories? How justified are the assumptions made in the questions? By thoroughly addressing these questions I propose to re-visit the data to seek a deeper understanding. This accords with Rogers' (1967) approach to therapy, where feelings and cognition merge into one experience – participation in the process – allowing hunches to develop out of experience, and then applying these hunches to an objective sense-making process.

In the following chapter I propose to present my 'surface findings' – i.e. the data in its raw form, without the benefit of critical analysis.

**Chapter 5**  
**A Pattern Emerging**  
**The interviews**

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## Chapter 5

### A pattern emerging

#### The interviews

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***'I believe that crisis really helps to develop the character of an organisation'***

John Sculley

#### 5.1 Introduction

This Chapter sets out in more detail the range of responses given by participants. Further analysis is undertaken in the following chapter.

The interviews were semi-structured, where I had a broad idea of the kind of information I was seeking, but I allowed the interviewee to set the pace and the framework. Following the use of open-ended questions I used probing questions and adopted the NLP 'meta-model' as a way of ensuring that the questioning was rigorous and challenging. There were occasions when respondents were slightly uncomfortable with this kind of questioning – one particular respondent stating that they felt 'challenged', but all respondents were prepared to elaborate and explain further. This approach was particularly important when interviewees used metaphor to describe their experiences of working in the organisation. (This will be explored in more detail in chapter 6, where the responses are analysed in depth). I was careful to reassure all interviewees that this interview approach was to ensure my own objectivity and to ensure that I did not re-interpret information or distort responses. At the end of many of the interviews, respondents stated that they had enjoyed the process and had valued the time to reflect. Many subsequently offered me further help and support, and some sent me articles and references.

The average length of interview transcripts (in handwritten form) was 6 pages. The following is an example of a complete interview transcript, which includes my follow-up questions. This interview was conducted using the NLP meta-model as a tool for critical questioning. The researcher's questions are presented in bold type, to distinguish them from the respondent's answers. Although during the interview every effort was made to record as much as possible, it was necessary for me to capture critical information by leaving out minor detail, or detail about organisational initiatives which I already knew about. Much informal discussion took place during the course of each interview, making sure that the respondents were happy with the approach and felt that my questions were helpful and useful.

I have chosen the following interview because it represents the key messages emerging from all 50 interviews. During this interview the atmosphere was pleasant, the respondent was animated and good humoured, and I found myself laughing at some of their responses, whilst pushing them for more information. Overall, the individual responded to my questions positively and willingly, but was adept at avoiding answering the critical questions in any detail. At one point during the interview my questioning seemed to be irritating the respondent and so time was taken explaining why I was pushing for more information and/or examples. This was a common feature of many of the interviews, with participants becoming embarrassed, confused or mildly irritated when they felt unable to support their statements. However, careful explanation on my part usually served to diffuse the situation, and respondents were more than willing to continue with the interview process.

Later on in this chapter, data from all of the interviews is presented using the original research questions as categories – described as 'summarizing and packaging' by Miles and Huberman (1994).

## **5.2 Interview no 35 – complete transcript**

Some time spent explaining the interview process, and informing them that I would be pushing them for as much information as possible, asking them to be

### ***What is it like working here?***

*\*\*\*\*! I might launch into my diatribe about the organisation or I might joke 'I plait red tape'.*

*It's pretty horrible – at the moment the organisation doesn't have any clear purpose. It is solely existing to exist – it's lost sight of why it's there. It and some people in it are so far up themselves now. It seems that all we aspire to is mediocrity and the only thing we ever reward is failure. You work across a whole range of different people in the organisation – I do it to a lesser extent – don't you get the feeling of terminal boredom – terminal blockage? As if the whole organisation is totally constipated. It's all so different from about 4/5 years ago – I've spent all my working life in local government – the honeymoon times are when everything is new and people are allowed to make things happen without restraint.*

### ***What specifically happened four or five years ago that doesn't happen now?***

*We were new – a new authority. We had no rules, no frameworks. We just got on with the job. We were free and able to use our imaginations, our initiative. Things got done.*



### **What things?**

(Gave an example of a large organisational initiative which was started at the launch of the new authority. Some time spent exploring this initiative and its success)

*This was very worrying for the anal retentives in the centre – now we're past the first flush of the honeymoon and the retentives are strangling the bloody life out of it.*

**How are they strangling the life out of it? The anal retentives? Give me an example.**

*They invent systems. They invent processes. Keeps them in jobs. It's nothing to do with what we're here for.....all about the illusion of change without anything changing. Making sure everything stays the same. Busy doing nothing. Systems to do nothing with*

### **What systems? Specifically?**

*Where do I start? Here's an example – the.....(described a data gathering process in some detail, which cannot be shared for reasons for confidentiality)  
How many meetings have we had to discuss that? A working group to discuss how to collect data, to analyse this, to measure that, to develop plans as a result of the analysis – it's a joke! I sat in a meeting with (list of names of individuals from across the organisation) which was a near death experience. (Gave several examples of who said what, who tried to stop things happening by presenting obstacles etc). It's just another system – it won't change anything.  
They keep dreaming up more of the bloody things. We don't do the job in hand – emptying the bloody bins! They just tell lies to themselves and to each other,*

*making out that the systems are important, making out that this is crucial stuff – it actually matters!*

**Who are they?**

*Managers, policy people, the performance measurers, the bureaucrats in accounts and in the legal section. (gave a list of names and jobs in the authority, and generally criticised them personally and professionally). They're all at it. The closer/finishers – they like the safety of working within a clearly defined box. All the closer/finishers have usurped the power in the organisation. Now we have forms/checklists to fill in for no other purpose than to fill them in. You must complete your WD40 in triplicate – 26 boxes in column a) etc. This is bureaucracy gone mad.*

**WD40?**

*Forms! Endless bloody forms and processes all for nothing. Must fill them in for nothing. You know what I mean.*

**What would happen if we didn't? Didn't fill them in?**

*Exactly. Nothing would happen if we didn't. In fact a whole lot more would happen if we didn't. We'd have time to deliver services. We might even get peoples' bins emptied on time.*

**What, then, do you think is the organisation's problem? In addition to what you've just said? What is at the heart of this?**

*We don't have a clear direction – they want to be everything to everyone. The organisation has grown beyond the intellectual capability of its leaders. A big organisation, small-minded leaders.*

### ***What do you mean?***

*We don't have any inspirational leaders – setting a clear goal – more and more recently seem to be almost a derivative of Millbank – ensuring that everything is 'on message'. The message that we've forgotten is that if you don't have anything to say then don't say anything. Traditionally we've blamed central government and the changing requirements – I don't think this is true – we have options – they are not prescriptive! Actions are left up to us. People are fearing the unknown, maybe? Or not up the challenges – 'constraints' is the bureaucratic cop-out for doing nothing – we have, in the past, found a way round them! Now we over-complicate things.*

### ***Why not now? Why don't we find a way round them now?***

*The organisation doesn't value people who try and find their way round things – e.g. the risk takers – look at the people at the top table! The route to greatness is surely to fail at managing services! This is the true path to bloody enlightenment! Cock up something....*

### ***An example?***

*(Talked about an individual senior manager in some detail, suggesting that they had failed in their job as a service manager and had been promoted despite this) .....appalling record – how ....got away with it is gob smacking. This is corruption. Be \*\*\*\*, get paid lots more money and get to set the direction for the Council. Great. .... not capable of setting a direction. He/she's only capable of keeping a job. So what better way? Invent more systems which serve no purpose. Keep busy doing nothing. One cock up, big promotion, two cock ups maybe you get rumbled. So keep busy avoiding risk.*

**Who is the organisation? Who are they?**

*The leaders. Senior management. The people at the top. It's obviously the Senior Management Team's responsibility.*

**Obvious to whom? Who is making this judgement, and on what grounds?**

*(Laughter and mild irritation) It's obvious to you, and me, and anyone who cares to look around. Okay, I'm making the judgement, on the grounds that leaders should lead. Shouldn't they? Or am I missing something? You tell me! You're the leadership person. What are they for, then? Shouldn't they be setting the tone? What are they paid for?*

**I'm interviewing you**

*Well, any answers gratefully received, Jenny..*

*(some laughter at this point and time spent explaining why I was pushing the respondent to be more specific about his answers. This was important because the respondent was showing signs of impatience)*

**What is your relationship with/contribution to this problem?**

*Yes – we all have a responsibility – I am one of the busy people - my relationship or contribution is a little more difficult – generally being a bad person is the contribution I make.*

**What does 'being a bad person' mean?**

*Trying to make people understand that there is a world outside and the internal organisational of the council is only important to us – to spend so much time and*

*energy on it is self-serving. I tend to perhaps let loose on my colleagues who are spending too much time up themselves. It makes me feel better and adds to my reputation across the council.*

***'Let loose'. What do you do?***

*Take the \*\*\*\*. Shout, sulk, criticise, undermine. Sometimes I behave badly. But then I think my bad behaviour is better than theirs – the anal retentives. At least I'm alive.*

*But the organisation (from the top) hasn't said that it is unhappy with the way things are – if it were to say so then I think it would be easier for those who want to change it.*

***Do you want to change it?***

*Yes. But I don't know how. It's impossible. I can't solve this – the staff can't solve it.*

***Why? What prevents you? What prevents them?***

*That fact that no-one says they're unhappy with the way things are – no-one cares enough. How can you change anything when no-one gives a \*\*\*\* if you do or you don't? What's the point? So I use my energy in other ways. I don't know about everyone else. Maybe the same applies. Ask them! Ask yourself why you haven't changed anything – what's stopping you? Or maybe you will, through this research, I don't know.*

*At the moment we would feel under threat. I feel bad for challenging (unhelpful, obstructive) – people would describe us in this way! It's the emperor's new clothes stuff.*

## **People?**

*Senior management. The procedures people.*

*There are anarchists in the organisation who share the same view that things ought to be better and who would want to challenge the way the organisation grinds itself into the dust. After a while you say why bother? Do we have a vested interest in it being like this? I would like to think no but I have a sneaking suspicion yes. The organisation in the past was making it up as it went along – it had placed no restrictions on itself and set no expectations. Anything had the potential to be right.*

*It isn't enough for me to want to work for and with the organisation – I want more from it.*

## **What makes you happy working here?**

*Finding ways of doing my job despite the organisation, not because of it.*

*Circumventing bureaucracy to get things done – this is quite enjoyable!*

*Just doing what you're employed to do ends up being a bit of a game – the organisation puts hurdles in your way. You have to walk round them – their game is to jump over them.*

## **Can you give me an example of hurdles?**

*Committees, policies, procedures, waiting for decisions, having no budget, having no commitment or interest from the people who matter. People getting bored half way through and so it all stops. Rules, regulations – all stifling. The*

*painfully slow way things are done. These are hurdles. The hurdle is there to stop anything changing. That's what it's for. To stop change.*

***How do you get round them? Give me an example.***

*(Example of one initiative given). I break the rules. I do things in secret.*

***What makes you unhappy?***

*The normal \*\*\*\* that we see coming round. Strategies/policies – write another one, stick it on the shelf, never re-visit it – people write them for the sake of writing them.*

*I prefer to work with a no policy policy.*

*We'd rather have 6 more strategists and get rid of 6 home helps to pay for it – gloss rather than helping the OHPs to get through their twilight years. We've lost our way.*

***When you are unhappy how do you get through your working day?***

*I have been known to remind people that it's not important. Go and have a fag. Nothing surprises me any more, no matter how stupid it is. Sometimes I think the organisation can't go any further up itself and then it manages another twist, to some other anal cavity.*

***Can you say any more?***

*Not really – you get the point. I get through. Fags, cynicism, watching paint dry, talking to you – I get through and it's okay.*

### ***What needs to happen?***

*I'd have a long conversation with the leader, have a long look at the borough and its services. I would then have a long look at the senior managers here and then start to get a bit of honesty and reality into making people understand what it is we need to achieve and how we're going to do it. Maybe sack some people – some of the people who earn money for doing nothing, and some of the people who do a lot to stop progress. Sack them.*

### ***Who? Who are these people?***

*How long have you got? (reeled off a list of names of individuals, not all of whom were leaders/managers).*

### ***Is there anything else you want to say?***

*Not really. I feel great now! An enjoyable way to spend the day – bitching*

(some time wrapping up the interview, explaining the purpose of the research and the process, and thanking the respondent).

### **5.3 Key themes/quotes arising from each question**

The following data has been reproduced from the transcripts of all the research interviews. Each response is taken directly from transcripts (in this chapter each quotation has the number of the interview next to it) and is representative of the overall response to each question. I have attempted, throughout this thesis, to present quotations from *all* respondents, although the reader may see particular respondents' quotations used more often – this is because they articulated their views and perceptions in ways which I believe are illuminating, as well as representative of what other respondents were attempting to tell me.



These, then, are the responses to the 'analyst-constructed' categories/questions. I remained conscious, in producing this data, that these questions may well not have corresponded with the meanings and categories created by participants.

1. What is it like for you working here?

The overwhelming response to this question was negative. All but 2 respondents described their experience of working for the council as a negative experience. Of the 2 respondents who were positive about the organisation, 1 was a very new member of staff and 1 was performing a very practical role in the organisation – one where he/she would remain relatively 'untouched' by wider organisational issues. However, both respondents were concerned about their own ability to remain positive given the pressure they felt on them to see things differently.

- *'if I stay too long I'll become a cynic. Once I've done the work I'll need to re-channel my energies'.* (interview no 34)
- *'I still have the enthusiasm but I am being more realistic now. There is an element of collusion and this is definitely having an impact on me...'* (interview no 31)

Interviewees repeatedly stated the view that the organisation was over-managed, was obsessed with systems and procedures and used them as a way of avoiding change and was, therefore, a very frustrating place in which to work. They talked of a lack of direction, a lack of challenge, a lack of any real change, and of the inability amongst managers to take decisions. Many respondents felt that the organisation was busy doing nothing and one interviewee said that he/she dreamed of *'having a real job one day'*. (interview no 20).

Many people expressed the view that the only thing that mattered was the 'game', and that some individuals at senior levels were very good at self-promotion when they actually had very little to offer.

- *'there are the arse-lickers – the people who will wear purple to please the Chief Executive, people who will drink the right tea.....defined by their lack of decision-making – let's have another meeting, let's write another report on this...'* (interview no 16)
- *'you are either 'in' or 'out' here – if you're 'out' you may as well not be here...'* (interview no 32)

Interviewees used the following words/phrases to describe how it felt for them (these are presented with the number of the interview next to them):

- *'it feels like a roller-coaster...it makes me frustrated, tired. Why should I bother?'* (1)
- *'I have an ambivalent relationship with this organisation – I like and I don't like it...'* (2)
- *'it is politically charged – people behave badly'*(3)
- *'dispiriting'* (4)
- *'we're always building up to the big fight in our behaviours....'* (4)
- *'...I've felt like a pawn in a game...'*(5)
- *'...I've felt lonely, unsupported....I am networked .....people are suspicious of my motives.....'* (6)
- *'to work here was, in retrospect, the same, day after day. I didn't realise how disempowered I was, how de-energised...'* (7)
- *'they talk about a no blame culture.... What a \*\*\*\*ing load of \*\*\*p'* (8)
- *'....there is a critical mass of people who won't change ....the majority of the organisation....'*(9)
- *'I just don't think I've every known anything like it'* (10)

- *'even though I am temporary I feel myself slipping into the council culture. It's a wrist-cutting experience...'*(11)
- *'feels personally destructive. Confusion. Too much information, too many alternatives'* (12)
- *'the rules aren't explicit. It's a game. It's like Alice in Wonderland playing croquet.... The hoops are soldiers, the balls are hedgehogs and the mallets are flamingos. The hoops walk around, the ball goes where it likes, the mallets are unwieldy. How do you know if you've won, or scored a point?'* (12)
- *'we are constantly doing the same things again and again..... and 'this council does nothing but re-organise'* (13)
- *'I feel not valued really'*(14)]
- *'the lunatics are running the asylum...'*(15)
- *'the system frustrates change'*(16)
- *'uncomfortable – a harsh and unfriendly environment'* (17)
- *'stressful for me. I can't bring anything to fruition'* (18)
- *'I couldn't have done what I do now in my 20s/30s. They don't make decisions here'*.(19)
- *'now it feels chaotic, not a good place – people are undervalued*
- *'I couldn't say anything very positive at the moment'* (20)
- *'I've found myself slipping into local government complacency.....I feel bloody awful..'*(21)
- *'I ask myself why I've been here so long. We never see the results of change. I feel cynical about change'.* (22)
- *'...all this \*\*\*p about a learning organisation.....we just sit and talk and nothing happens....'* (23)
- *'...it feels like coming into battle every day, more like having to defend your position than move forward....'* (24)
- *'all I get is 'flannel'.....we never do it...'*(25)
- *'there is continual conflict at what comes out of peoples mouths and what actually happens...'* (26)

- *'I have learned to just do my job and don't threaten...'* (27)
- *'...It's solely existing to exist...'*(28)
- *'you have to look over your shoulder when times get hard...'* (29)
- *'Stationary –disorganised..'* (30)
- *'I am powerless'* (31)
- *'....There's a fear of failure, of something going wrong – it's much safer to shut the door and stay perfectly still....'* (32)
- *'lack of strategic direction and operational direction'*(33)
- *'Everything you do there's a form for it...'* (34)
- *'\*\*\*\*! I might launch into my diatribe about organisations, or I might joke 'I plait red tape'....'* (35)
- *lack of direction/clarity'*(36)
- *'...everyone is busy trying to make an impression...'* (37)
- *'I don't trust anyone. It's Autocratic...'* (38)
- *'...there is a flight/anxiety atmosphere...'* (39)
- *'...it is full of corporate shite....'* (40)
- *It's like 'I Claudius'. I can hear the music, Dark, thrusting. Who's going to be the next Caligula?....'* (41)
- *frustrating'* (42)
- *'confusing'* (43)
- *'The longer you work here the more cynical you become'* (44)
- *'bloody hard work, frustrating'*(45)
- *'I despair'*(46)
- *'...Frustrating. I can't make a difference...'* (47)
- *'all gloss and very little substance'* (48)
- *'no-one can say what they really want me to do'*(49)
- *"I feel let down'* (50)

My overall impression was of a group of people who had no sense of what they were really there to do – even when interviewing front line service providers the

general view expressed was that no-one knew what really mattered, and what was valued.

## 2. What, if anything, is the organisation's problem?

All respondents identified problems – no individual said that the organisation did not have any significant problems. Overall, the problems were identified as lack of leadership, lack of direction, 'silos', lack of resources and the lack of incentives. The dominant view was that all the changes the organisation had been through had contributed to negative behaviours.

One respondent (interviewee number 16) described the organisation as a 'Stepford Wives' organisation - their view was that when staff joined they had a 'chip' inserted to make them behave in certain ways and say certain things. Another described it as like a bungalow in Peacehaven; every subsequent owner has asked the 'builders' i.e. the staff, to add to it – roofs, windows, more floors, a turret, conservatory etc. None of the employees knew what it is they were building any more – they were just working on their own bits of the building, but had no sense of what it was supposed to look like. This respondent said that these days he was mostly '*round the back having a fag*' (interviewee number 12).

- '*resistance to change – we've been through such a lot...*' (1)
- '*Power struggles, bullying... Rumours used to strengthen individuals' positions...*'(4)
- '*we use as many words as possible – it's the next step that's the problem....*'(5)
- '*homeostasis – it's the nature of organisations not to change. If you change it's an admission that you were wrong. Why admit that?*'(38)
- '*We are in a victim mentality. We infantilise people*'.(6)
- '*no incentives for people to think originally*' (6)

- *'No leadership..' (8)*
- *'The reputation of the Council is nothing like reality' (9)*
- *'Critical mass of 'wreckers' – maintain the anti-movement. Others don't care ... they are the status quoers..' (9)*
- *No one ever confronts poor performance'. (10)*
- *“\*\*\*\*” knows what the people in the middle and at the top are doing- but they appear to be very busy! ’ (12)*
- *'...we're constantly rewarding directors for empire building and not being corporate... ' (13)*
- *'we can't do what we should' (14)*
- *'it's like the emperor's new clothes – no-one ever says the truth... ' (15)*
- *'Management speak' rules – common sense doesn't' (16)*
- *'the buddy-buddy thing between directors' (16)*
- *'lack of clarity re objectives..' (17)*
- *'We never finish anything'(18)*
- *'people steal your work'(18)*
- *'Power struggles are more for the ego than for the work'(19)*
- *'no performance management, no accountability..' (20)*
- *'We have recruited such dross at the top .... dross is then recruiting dross...' (21)*
- *'SMB. (Senior Management Board) They are supposed to be the leaders' (22)*
- *'we don't implement anything'(23)*
- *'Busy-ness. We are all busy. Why?' (25)*
- *'Power struggles'(30)*
- *'people feel bullied'(34)*
- *'we over-complicate things'(35)*
- *'silo....lots of rhetoric about breaking down barriers, but just rhetoric...it doesn't make any difference..' (40)*

- *'People at the bottom are not enthused by management – It's management's fault' (42)*
- *'The system serves the organisation rather than the customers...'* (33)
- *'Lack of leadership'*(44)
- *'unresolved issues about the culture of the organisation – people in key positions need to go..'* (48)

There was a pervading view (mentioned in different ways by 33 interviewees) that many people in the organisation worked very hard at doing nothing – respondents were struggling to understand what people/sections in the authority actually contributed to the work of the organisation.

### 3. What is your relationship/contribution to this problem/these issues?

With the exception of two respondents, everyone believed that they were not personally responsible for the situation they had described. The predominant view was that they had tried to challenge, or that they were unable to challenge, and that they had to cope with the situation, feeling powerless. Respondents who answered differently acknowledged that they were colluding with the situation by not challenging, but were confused about what to do, and how to challenge the status quo.

- *'I swing between needing to become more centred and adapting to the organisation...I'm colluding...my experience is leading to cynicism...'* (interview no 11)
- *'I'm part of the problem but not out of choice...I'm powerless...probably everyone you interview will say that...who is accountable?'* (interview no 8)

Two respondents likened their relationship to the organisation to an abusive relationship – one said *'if this were a relationship I would have got out'* (interview no 6) – another said *'I have taken the role of down-trodden partner – I reinforce things, behaviours...'* (interview no 1)

One respondent admitted that they were likely to inflict bad behaviours on their staff – the same behaviours that they had experienced. When asked why they said *'they make me do it'*. When asked who they said they didn't know! (interview no 12)

- *'I'm part of the system, I know – but I don't like upsetting people...'* (2)
- *'I become self-critical – I am not uncharacteristic of others in the organisation'* (6)
- *'I don't know how to challenge it – if I knew how to help I would'* (8)
- *'I am not part of it – but maybe I am. How would I know? What is it I have to do to not be part of it?'*(9)
- *'I'm not the architect – I'm just a builder...'* (12)
- *'I might be doing it, but intellectually I have my integrity but in my behaviour I might not'* (12)
- *'I am holier than thou! The righteous one!'*(16)
- *'I live in constant fear because I challenge too much...'* (19)
- *'I challenge with a small 'c' – it's a risk...'* (22)
- *'I moan about it! I don't have enough 'clout' to challenge...'* (25)
- *'I've ended up being in the middle of it – in many ways I'm one of the people not necessarily needed...'* (26)
- *people...after a while you just keep your mouth shut...'* (27)
- *'to keep your job you have to go along to some degree...'* (29)
- *'You try to challenge.....you are called a luddite.....'* (30)
- *'I am one of the busy people...'* (35)
- *'promises made behind backs – how do I challenge that?'* (37)



- *'I can look back and see where I should have said/done something....'* (38)
- *'I am colluding with the problem now. I am ashamed...'* (40)
- *'I've decided I don't give a \*\*\*\* for now...'* (42)
- *'...I don't see myself responsible for the problems...'* (47)
- *'Why don't I say no? I do what I'm supposed to. Is it my historical \*\*\*\*? I don't know...'* (49)
- *'I want a divorce'* (50)

Many interviewees accepted that by not challenging the issues they were unhappy with they were in fact colluding with the problems. However, they believed this was not their choice. When asked who was responsible for making the changes/challenging the status quo respondents were unclear about where to place the responsibility.

#### 4. What makes you happy working here?

The responses to this question were very limited, and almost predictable after a few interviews. Very few respondents focused on achievement at work being a motivational factor (of the 50 interviewed, 5 mentioned doing a good job. One respondent could not find anything).

- *'people I trust and respect..'* (1)
- *'I draw energy from my team...'* (2)
- *'flexi-time, family-friendly policies'* (3)
- *'I like the peoples' games – I like to watch them...'* (4)
- *'I feel encouraged for the future ..maybe things will make sense now...'* (referring to the new CE) (6)
- *'people – and leaving!'*(7)
- *'I get comfort from home...'* (9)

- *'home – and working with my team'* (10)
- *'Good variety of people...'* (11)
- *'Doing small bits of handywork for other organisations!'* (referring to some freelance consultancy) (12)
- *Good friends – a lovely office...'* (17)
- *'I'm relaxed about holding on to my job – I feel secure...'* (19)
- *'the people. My .... view..'* (20)
- *'Trying to find other jobs'* (21)
- *'The canteen. It rocks my world.'* (32)
- *'When I can change things. Success through adversity...'* (37)
- *'To watch change – or no change...'* (38)
- *'Lovely office!'*(39)
- *'The opportunity to develop my skills...'*(49)

#### 5. What makes you unhappy?

All respondents had plenty to say about what made them unhappy. No-one refused to answer this question, although some participants reminded me of their answers to previous questions.

Respondents often expressed a feeling of exhaustion, of being treated as a child, of being manipulated and disempowered. Many individuals said that they felt uncomfortable – believing that their ethics were being compromised/offended. Some respondents were quite clearly distressed as they spoke – one respondent described the organisation as being in an 'acute' phase. Others were angry, others gave the impression of finding it all amusing and entertaining, whilst at the same time expressing some quite strong views about the organisation and what it has done to them. One respondent described the organisation as a 'circus' – they said you could sit back and watch to see who is walking the tightrope this week, who will get the pie in the face, who is the lion tamer, who's playing the clown, etc. (interview no 4).

- *'the strain and disappointment of trying to live up to a fantasy of what we can achieve...'* (1)
- *'So much scheming'* (4)
- *'What I lost last time is a sense of my own value...this time I will not let that happen ....they're not going to beat that out of me...'* (5)
- *'I am afraid of being disappointed again'.*(6)
- *'The overwhelming culture is to keep things the same'* (9)
- *'I'm bored. I'm exhausted'.*(12)
- *'I refuse to accept other people's power...'* (16)
- *'my ethics are offended...'* (17)
- *'Maybe I delude myself, but I don't care, frankly...'* (19)
- *'feeling alone – not knowing who to turn to..'* (20)
- *'My work is implicitly negative..'* (21)
- *'two-faced organisation..'*(22)
- *'I thought I could make a difference and I can't'* (23)
- *'I suffer when I know I'm not living my ethics, but I can't because of the memory of those who did live by their ethics...'* (24)
- *'Not being asked, not being listened to..'* (25)
- *'when I do work I know makes no difference...'* (26)
- *'I've seen this before and it will all end in tears..'* (27)
- *same story, different day...'* (32)
- *'the lack of human skills – kindness..'* (40)

6. When you are unhappy, how do you get through your working day?

All the respondents had worked out 'survival strategies' which involved disengaging from the organisation. There were many ways of doing this – some just stopped working and pursued their own interests, others focused on something they could achieve within their own area. Many respondents used

friends and colleagues who they could trust, but some expressed concern about who was actually trustworthy within the organisation (this could account for the fact that interviewees were generally unwilling to be taped). One respondent, who was elsewhere impressively self-critical, honest and analytical, when asked how they got through their working day, said

*'I whinge, moan, rat, hate, undermine, damn, blame, turn someone into a monster'. (interviewee 12).*

They admitted that this behaviour bore an uncanny resemblance to the behaviour they had criticised in others, and they immediately saw the organisational consequences of people responding to bad behaviour with bad behaviour. (The organisation feeding its own problem!)

- *'I put my head down and focus on my division' (1)*
- *'I sustain good relationships with champions/protectors' (2)*
- *'I imagine people as monkeys and I am the lion' (4)*
- *'It's like domestic violence – I just continue. I seek support and I don't challenge. I keep it the same'. (6)*
- *'Home life helps – if home life were bad I don't know what I'd do'(9)*
- *'Get through the days...'(11)*
- *'I act it out on people' (12)*
- *'I just get through. I disengage'.(13)*
- *'I vent my spleen. It gets me into trouble. This is a Stepford Wives organisation...'(16)*
- *'Go to lunch with friends..' (17)*
- *'I'm okay. I started life wanting to be liked but I've got over that'.(19)*
- *'I get to the point of being paralysed with stress...'(20)*

- *'Prioritise my work and do it...one day I'm gonna hit someone and I need to make sure I don't....'* (21 – N.B. – this was a member of the senior management team)
- *'I get the vacancy paper out. I feel like crying. Why did I bother?'* (25)
- *'I'm going to get my revenge kicks in...'* (33)
- *'Go and have a fag..'* (35)
- *'Concentrate on social activities...'* (39)
- *'Getting pissed. Trying to find other jobs'.*(41)
- *'Talk to a colleague. Moan – which I know is non-constructive but I've reached the point where I don't know how to change anything'.* (42)
- *'Tidy up, change round...'* (45)
- *'E-mailing for other jobs...'* (50)

7. What do you think needs to happen in this organisation?

15 respondents felt strongly that some senior managers should be 'sacked'. One respondent described it as 'dangerous' to have some of these people at the top of the organisation. Many others said managers should stop the planned reorganisation today, and take time to watch and learn. Others asked to be listened to, others that the organisation rids itself of cumbersome systems and processes.

A few respondents (5) were pinning their hopes on the new Chief Executive – they described him as a possible 'light' – but others were genuinely afraid that he would fail – that the task was too big for him.

One respondent suggested putting the entire organisation 'on the couch'. (no 10).

- *'we need to take everything to pieces and start from scratch. We need to decide what we are here to do...'* (1)
- *'leadership development...'* (2)
- *'I'd like to be asked for my opinion and see something change as a result...'* (3)
- *'Sack the top team. Maybe if they had some of the stuff they dish out....'* (4)
- *'Give people space to get in touch with their own motivation...'* (6)
- *'Throw away a lot of the processes....'* (7)
- *The new CE is the key....he must get to grips with the management team...'* (8)
- *'....moving together as one...even if it's to Shitedom it's better than just fragmenting...'* (9)
- *'Cut the cord – get rid of people'. (11)*
- *'Stop the reorganisation tomorrow! I can't recall anything good that came out of any re-organisations!'* (15)
- *'people have been chosen because they will please the master. The Kings Court. Make them accountable. If you earn 50 – 70k then tell people what you do!'* (16)
- *'People need to stop disappearing up their own arses and make change happen'. (19)*
- *'Invest more time in stopping telling people what we are going to do to them and tell them what we are going to do for them....'* (21)
- *'chaos must be replaced with clarity..'* (22)
- *'The new CE, , maybe? A light?'* (25)
- *'No more change! Stick with things now..'* (27)
- *'maybe new leadership will do it...'* (28)
- *'Listen to us, value us...'* (29)
- *'Don't change anything – listen, ask, try to understand, involve people...'* (31)
- *'Strip directors of their titles...'* (32)

- 'I wouldn't have a clue. I'd sit around for about 6 months and see what was going on. I'd get you to do these interviews and then analyse them...' (33)
- 'Reverse the re-structure immediately' (36)
- 'Reverse this current cock-up'(38)
- 'Shut up and listen!' (40)
- 'Streamline management – get rid of some...' (47)
- 'Sack a number of people in top positions' (48)
- 'Get rid of some people' (49)

#### 5.4 Questions arising from the interviews

Rossman and Rallis (2003, pp 281) summarise the process of data familiarization and data analysis as follows:

- Review the data
- Let the data 'incubate'
- Review and review again
- 'live' with the data
- You must know the data intimately – there is no substitute for this

My question to myself, having completed the first stage of analysis, was, did I know the data intimately? What themes or categories were emerging despite my questions? What questions were arising for me as a result of studying the data?

The following *significant* words were used by respondents more than any others, but not necessarily in response to the same questions, and not necessarily for the same reasons. Indeed, participants contradicted each other in some cases, when talking about, for example, change. This is explored in detail in the following chapter.

Change – 165 times  
Management – 59 times  
Power – 44 times  
Relationship - 30 times  
Trust – 26 times

Whilst not necessarily providing me with straightforward answers, the frequent use of these words by respondents suggested that they were seeking some answers to their own confusion about, for example, where power lay, whether anything had actually changed, what kind of relationships they should expect, who they should trust and what the role was of 'management' in all of this?

The questions I have set out in the previous chapter, which I have used to structure my analysis of the data are relevant and important in that they were a very real reflection of my own feelings and my own level of confusion about the data I had collected. All these questions will be used as the data is analysed and conclusions are reached, drawing on theoretical perspectives on organisational and individual psychology and behaviours as a result of the identification of key themes. For the convenience of the reader, the questions are set out again:

1. Is the culture of the organisation a direct result of the continual change?
2. Why is it that respondents are only able to focus on their 'hygiene factors' and seem unable to reach higher levels of motivation?
3. How much are we feeding our own problem, by acting out negative behaviours, by disengaging rather than challenging and by projecting all the problems onto others?
4. Is it all really a problem, given that no-one seems to be doing anything about it?



5. Are we choosing to see things in a particular way because it makes it unnecessary for us to actually think?
6. Where does the responsibility for change lie?

In the following chapters I will attempt to further analyse the data, as well as making direct connections with theoretical perspectives, the history of the organisation and my own responses as a researcher.

## Chapter 6

### Deconstruction

### Making sense of the Data

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# Chapter 6

## Deconstruction

### Making Sense of the Data

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***'Reality leaves a lot to the imagination'***

(O'Connor and McDermott, 1996)

#### 6.1 Introduction

In this chapter I make sense of the findings using references to key theoretical perspectives; the organisational history and current challenges, and my own responses as a researcher.

In this chapter, I have chosen to use the following questions from the list to inform my analysis of the data:

1. Is the culture of the organisation a direct result of the continual change?
2. Why is it that respondents are only able to focus on their 'hygiene factors' and seem unable to reach higher levels of motivation?
3. How much are we feeding our own problem, by acting out negative behaviours, by disengaging rather than challenging and by projecting all the problems onto others?

At this stage, despite rigorous research approaches, I still struggled with the contradictory possibilities of not immediately having any answers or

explanations of my data, or of already having all the answers, based on my own experiences. The reader can see from the questions that I fell into the trap of building answers into them.

These questions will be addressed in depth, by drawing on both the data and on key theoretical perspectives. Complementary and contradictory ways of making sense of the data will be discussed in detail, and then I will present a summary of my response to each question – i.e. the conclusions I have reached as a result of a thorough consideration of the data and a range of theoretical perspectives. At the end of this chapter, I will present my conclusions which will be formed as a result of my detailed consideration of all three questions.

## **6.2 The questions, and the questions arising from the questions**

### **6.2.1. Question 1 - Is the culture of the organisation a direct result of the continual change?**

This question comprises two in one, appears to be loaded with assumptions on my part and I wish I had never thought of it. However, I will de-construct it in an attempt to make some sense of both the data and of my part as a researcher.

The question suggests that at the time of writing it down I had a reasonably clear view about the culture of the organisation, as a result of the research process. This assumption of mine, that I already knew about the culture, could well have been as a result of my own experiences and perceptions of the organisation. The process of dissecting the question has enabled me to develop a deeper, more objective understanding of what actually exists in the organisation, and whether or not it should be described as a 'culture'

The question also cites 'continual change' as a possible reason for the organisational 'culture', and this implies that it is true to say that the organisation

has experienced continual change. This will be checked again, using both the data and the organisational history.

### **6.2.2 Organisational culture – what did I mean by that?**

I now propose to review some perspectives on organisational culture in the light of the data, before drawing any conclusions.

As highlighted in the literature review, the concept of culture has been the subject of considerable academic debate and remains contested. Schein (1992) draws from a range of theoretical perspectives on culture to set out major categories of things shared or held in common within groups/organisations which are associated with culture, such as:

- observed behavioural regularities – the same rituals employed in a variety of situations
- group norms – implicit standards and values developing as groups work together
- espoused values – publicly articulated principles and values
- formal philosophy - the broad policies and ideologies that guide actions
- rules of the game – implicit rules for getting along at work
- climate – the feeling created by the physical layout of offices/buildings, and by interaction between people
- embedded skills – competencies held by group members which are not necessarily set out in person specifications, development plans etc
- ways of thinking, mental models – the shared cognitive frames that guide perceptions, thoughts and language used by members of a group and which are taught to new members (this sits comfortably alongside the neuro-linguistic programming perspectives on belief systems, 'gatekeepers' etc., as discussed earlier in this work)

- shared meanings – the emergent understandings created through interaction
- root metaphors or integrating symbols – ideas, feelings and images groups develop to characterise themselves which may or may not be conscious but which become embodied in buildings and office layout etc.

He defines culture as

*'A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems'. (Schein, 1992, p.12)*

Schein's broad definition is useful in analysing the basic assumptions emerging from the data, and how these assumptions have been passed on to new members of staff. His more detailed descriptors provide 'prompts' for exploring the data in more detail and will be re-examined later in this chapter.

Handy (1993) describes four main types of organisational cultures:

- Power culture – dependent on a central power source – control exercised from the centre – minimal bureaucracy and high levels of influence
- Role culture – stereotyped as a bureaucracy and working on logic and rationality with people and functions controlled by rules and procedures
- Task culture – job or project oriented, task cultures pull together the right resources and people and the whole group is utilized to achieve outcomes – expertise is valued more than position

- Person culture – the individual is the central focus and structures exist to serve the individuals within it. Control mechanisms are only used by mutual consent.

Handy's four culture types appear to be less complex than Schein's definition and descriptors, but do not provide an immediate explanation of or connection with the data. However, his descriptor of the person culture is one which will be re-visited during the analysis of the data.

Johnson (in Mullins, 1999) presents a culture web, bringing together different aspects for the analysis of organisational culture.

- Routines – the way members of the organisation behave towards each other and towards those outside the organisation
- Rituals – special events through which the organisation emphasises what is important
- Stories – told by members of the organisation which embed the present and flag up important events and personalities
- Symbols – logos, offices, cars, titles, language and terminology used
- Power structures – the most powerful individuals or groups in the organisations
- Control systems – measurement and reward systems which emphasise what is important
- Organisational structure – which reflects power structures and important relationships and activities within the organisation

Johnson's perspective does not immediately provide me with the answer to what I meant when I used the word 'culture' in my question, and the data provide little concrete evidence of specific routines and rituals existing within the organisation. Control systems, organisational power structures and stories have

emerged from the interviews and these will be explored in an attempt to define the organisational culture.

Egan (1993) refers to culture as the largest organisational control system which dictates behaviour. Institutions have both overt and covert cultures which influence business and organisational behaviours.

*'The covert set can be quite dysfunctional and costly. Culture – the assumptions, beliefs, values and norms that drive 'the way we do things here' – is the largest and most controlling of the systems because it affects not only overt organisational behaviour but also the shadow-side behaviour....culture lays down norms for the social system.....Culture tells us what kind of politics are allowed and just how members of an organisation are allowed to play the political game'. (Egan (1993) p. 37)*

Egan distinguishes between the 'preferred culture' and the 'culture in use' – the culture behind the culture carrying the real beliefs, values and norms driving behaviours. These remain unnamed, and unmentionable.

Egan's description is of something more nebulous – less distinct, more hazy and more complex than what can be seen, such as explicit rules, organisational structures, symbols, behaviours etc. His description reminds us of the need to explore below the surface in an organisation to develop a whole picture. Again, his perspective sits comfortably with the writings of Bandler and Grinder (1975) and O'Connor and McDermott (1996) regarding belief systems (as discussed earlier in this work). Argyris (1990) describes the need for human beings to be in command of their actions – and the fact that we have programmes in our heads about how to be in control. The first way is the use of the set of beliefs and values we hold about how to manage our lives, and the second is the rules we use to manage our beliefs.



These are called the espoused theories and theories in use, respectively. This perspective is similar to that of Schein, as he describes patterns of shared basic assumptions, to Egan's distinction between the 'preferred culture' and the 'culture in use' and to the NLP writings on belief systems.

My question, then, was limiting. Which culture was I referring to? The 'preferred culture' or the 'culture in use'? Are there clear 'rules of the game' in the organisation, and are there shared meanings within the organisation as a result of interaction? Taking Handy's types – which kind of description most represents the organisation? What did the respondents reveal about power structures and control systems, and how have they used stories to explain events? What are the espoused theories of action and the theories in use in this organisation? The data, re-examined, provides some clarity here.

#### Re-visiting the data to define the culture

There is, in fact, very limited agreement about the culture of the organisation by respondents – specifically when they have used the term 'culture' and then tried to describe it. People have used the term in frustration, e.g. *'it's the whole thing – the culture'*, and *'is it history/culture stuff? I don't know'* and *'I'm slipping into the council culture'*. Others have expressed the desire to *'understand the culture'* and others have challenged the council's own description of its culture – *'they say it's a no blame culture – what a load of .....* (Expletives used)

Alongside the inability of many respondents to define the culture, others have found one word descriptors, such as *'blame culture'*, *'culture of demotivation'*, *'fractured culture'*.

Some individuals have talked of the culture changing, or the culture needing to be changed, or the fact that it is hard to fit into the culture or that they are slipping into the council culture.

There is a great deal of contradiction in the data with regard to how people perceive the culture in the organisation.

It is clear, then, that as a researcher, my use of the term 'culture' in my question was based on something other than the descriptors or information provided by people in relation to their own use of the word 'culture'.

Furnham (1997) reproduces Rousseau's (1988) climate definitions in chronological order, and provides a range of perspectives on the definition of the word climate as opposed to culture. The defining attributes of climate, taking into account the diverse perspectives, would appear to be perceptions and descriptions – i.e. perceptions being sensations or realizations experienced by individuals and individual reports of these sensations. A related issue, according to Pace and Stern (1958), Guion (1973) and Payne (1990) is the amount of consensus within an organisation concerning the perceived climate. Payne (1990) has argued that the concept is invalid because perceptions are not shared across organisations, and so only departmental climates can exist and not organisational climates. Pace and Stern (1958) suggest a two thirds agreement has to be in place in order for the climate concept to be invoked – Guion (1973) has argued for 90 per cent agreement.

The conceptual issues relating to both culture and climate are complex, and Furnham (1997) suggests that these issues can be circumvented by talking of 'employee perceptions' rather than culture or climate.

The Oxford dictionary definitions of the words culture and climate are as follows:

*Culture: particular form, shape of type of intellectual development or civilization*

*Climate: prevailing trend of opinion or feeling in community or period.*

From the analysis undertaken so far, it would appear that there is more information emerging with regard to employee perceptions and opinions, and that these are following a trend, and so the word climate seems to be a more accurate descriptor. For the purposes of this work, the word climate appears to more directly reflect what is emerging from the research - the existence of a climate which is as a result of beliefs, opinions and perceptions. These perceptions have been expressed in a variety of ways by respondents – many have chosen to use metaphor as a way of putting across their views/perceptions. It could be argued, at this stage, that descriptions provided of the covert or shadow cultures (by such writers as Egan and Schein) are descriptions of organisational climate.

The interviewees have made very little reference to the espoused culture of the organisation as described in vision statements, values statements and publicity, but talk more of their perceptions, feelings and personal experiences. It is through analysis of this complex data that I have gained a stronger sense of the dominant *climate*, created by employee perceptions, and this information has enabled me to identify the appropriate existing descriptors (many of which are used in the context of the word culture, but which can just as easily be applied to the word climate) which appear to apply to the data. It is for this reason that my conclusions will refer to the climate of the organisation.

Many respondents chose to use metaphor and to describe their experience of working in the organisation, and the meaning behind these metaphors can be hard to grasp. Below are key examples of metaphors used during the interview process. Without using the words 'culture' or 'climate' (it is clear there is some confusion about how to define these words in the context of organisational life) the intention was that the questions would provide the researcher with an insight into employees' perceptions of their workplace.

- *'A roller-coaster'*
- *'If this were a relationship I would have got out. He's drinking, she's had it beaten out of her. I am her.'*
- *'We're always building up to the big fight in our behaviours'*
- *'I've felt like a pawn in a game.....I've been in a game'*
- *'Red tape...'*
- *'This organisation is like a large department store – we're all setting up our own stalls and no-one's sorted out who's selling what..'*
- *'....it's the language of politics – one department speaks French, another German and they pretend they're talking'*
- *'The rules aren't explicit – it's a game'*
- *'The lunatics are running the asylum'*
- *'Silos...'*
- *'Silo mentality...'*
- *'It's ivory tower – arms length. I feel small in a big pond..'*
- *'It's as if the whole organisation is totally constipated...'*
- *'It's damaged my health..'*
- *'There's something around here that's setting the tone – the place smells funny...'*
- *'I wear it a bit like a glove, but to an extent a frustration – I am fed up with the same pair of gloves..'*
- *'Brick walls...'*

The overwhelming message coming from this use of metaphor in response to the questions is that respondents appeared to be both frustrated by the quality of work and of relationships as well as fearful and unclear about the 'rules'. There is a strong indication from respondents that they felt there was something they wanted from the organisation and something they didn't know.

The absence of clarity about what was wanted and what was not known becomes evident as other assertions or more detailed explanations to support

metaphors are explored. These more detailed explanations were given as a result of probing and follow-up questioning:

- *'I find out about initiatives or ideas after they are implemented'*
- *'My position here feels insecure'*
- *'People are frightened. There's mistrust....People are unsure about their position..Rumours...'*
- *'This organisation has moved me around – it's out of my hands...'*
- *'I've felt lonely, unsupported – emotionally...'*
- *'Some things happened where I felt out of control and I knew I couldn't let that happen to me again...'* (member of staff who had left the organisation)
- *'I wonder what on earth I am doing and why....'*
- *'All the change...we never see the results of change...'*
- *'Shifting around at the top ... planning their schemes...'*
- *'The organisation is not honest...'*
- *'The Council has lost its way...'*
- *'Everybody is so ridiculous....What goes on at top team? Who understands the whole? No-one!'*
- *'There's no feeling of achievement'*
- *'Constant change and uncertainty, and recently mega-uncertainty...'*
- *'They don't want to talk to you....'*

These comments are a few examples of what repeatedly came from interviewees in response to the questions. The overwhelming message would appear to be that respondents, despite having specific roles, responsibilities and accountabilities as defined by their job descriptions and contracts of employment, didn't seem confident that they understood the 'rules of the game'. 'When pushed for more detailed explanations of what it is they didn't know, or they needed, respondents found it difficult to respond.

Such comments as *'All I get is flannel...'* and *'There is continual conflict at what comes out of people's mouths and what actually happens...'* were made. When asked to identify specific people or instances small examples were given of decisions which were not believed to have been the right decisions, or periods of uncertainty faced by individuals as a result of organisational changes, and feeling unsupported during that period of time. Nothing of significance was cited by respondents when asked for examples of what they were trying to say.

The use of metaphor to describe experiences in the authority, then, seemed to provide ambiguous data and when interviewees were asked to elaborate very few concrete examples were given to support the metaphor used. Cazal and Inns, in Grant Keenoy and Osrick (1998) raise the challenges connected with the use of metaphor to surface meaning.

*'The instability of meaning, illustrated by metaphor, erodes any firm security in understanding discourse and points to the elusive, ambiguous, interconnected and fluid nature of meaning'*. (Grant, Keenoy and Osrick, 1998, p.190)

As Willemacq and Sims assert (in Grant, Keenoy and Osrick, 1998) metaphor can be used to create sense. The sense-making process (in this case the use of metaphor) can be the birth or creation of sense for the individual. If it is accepted, then, that the use of metaphor by respondents was about making sense of the situation for themselves, then this process begins to shed some light on the organisational climate. The more *'people are buried in a mind-numbing avalanche of information'* (Boje and Dennehy, 1993; 155), the greater the importance of stories and metaphor.

Boje and Dennehy describe story-telling specifically as a way in which people make their experiences meaningful, and Morgan (1998) describes metaphor as

*a 'primal force through which humans create meaning by using one element of experience to understand another'.*

The use of metaphor by respondents to describe what it was like working for the local authority was, it would seem, a sense-making process for themselves. The meanings arising from the use of metaphor were ambiguous and remained so even after requests for clarification. It would seem that respondents were using metaphor make sense for themselves of an organisation where meaning was elusive, ambiguous and unstable.

In short, the use of metaphor was a way of dealing with the unknown, the uncertain and the paradoxical nature of life within this local authority. The metaphors were ambiguous and elusive, as, it seems, was the *culture* of the organisation (i.e. the way we do things around here) for the respondents.

When interviewees were pushed to identify their needs, and to clarify what it was they needed to know, they were unable to, but their engagement in the research process and their willingness to share their perceptions via the use of metaphor created the temporary illusion for them and for the researcher that they did know something. What it appears they were struggling with was how little they knew about the kind of organisation they were working for, and how little they were able to clearly articulate, because much of what they were struggling with was tacit rather than explicit. How, then, can this be defined in terms of a culture or climate, using the perspectives as outlined earlier in this chapter?

Schein's mental models, shared meanings and rules of the game, set in the context of his over-arching definition (presented earlier on in this chapter) seem relevant to the data arising from the interviews.

Handy's definition of the 'person' culture will be explored in the context of the data, as will the perspectives of Johnson, Egan and Argyris.

### Mental models (Schein)

In common with the work done on 'belief systems', within neuro linguistic programming theory, Schein asserts that perceptions, thoughts and language used by members of a group are then taught to new members to reinforce and perpetuate organisational culture.

Whilst failing to find a collective understanding or common way of describing the organisation, my research revealed a collective agreement that things were, at best, unclear, and, at worst, chaotic, and that there was a lack of understanding about the 'rules of the game'.

These perceptions existed for 100% of respondents – a proportion of whom were new to the organisation, others were working on temporary contracts and two respondents located at the very top level of the organisation. All respondents believed they were missing information of some kind and it would appear that many felt powerless and unable to control what they did not understand.

- *'Helplessness. There's nothing you can do. They make the rules and change them as and how it suits them....'*
- *'It's very difficult to fit into the culture and the ways of working. There's a certain language, way of thinking, challenging...'*
- *'There's no one way to find out how the Council works...it's all ad hoc...it's very difficult for me...'*



### Shared meanings (Schein)

As discussed earlier, it was difficult to make sense of the range of responses about how it was to work in the local authority – but respondents shared the view that it was a negative experience and that the ‘rules’ were unclear.

These shared understandings (i.e. that we don’t understand) will have been created/reinforced through interaction, and this will be re-visited as the data is further analysed.

- *‘Everything and nothing is a priority...’*
- *‘When I try to tie what I do with the strategic vision the vision is all things to all men – I can’t handle it. It’s very woolly – there’s an air of pessimism...’*
- *‘...Lack of clarity re objectives....and really believing that people want you to do the job in the way you are doing...’*

### The rules of the game (Schein)

Schein describes these as the implicit rules for getting along at work.

There appeared to be an overwhelming desire to know what these were – some respondents attempted to make their own up in response to other questions (more information on this will be provided later). The dominant response, however, was that interviewees didn’t know what ‘game’ they were in and what the rules were, and believed that the rules could change anyway.

- *‘I’ve no understanding of the rules, the game...’*
- *‘I’ve felt like a pawn in a game.....I’ve been in a game...’*
- *‘No direct answers. No direction.....’*

- *'It's cyclical – patterns, repeats of everything...here we go again. Who's in charge? What game are we playing?'*
- *'There's no sense of what is 'right'. It's like being at public school....and hoping that the school bully won't notice you..'*

### Person culture v role culture (Handy)

It could be argued at this stage that there is data emerging to support the existence of a preference for a person culture within the authority. Handy (1993) describes the person culture as unusual and not found pervading many organisations. However, he asserts that many individuals will cling on to some of its values. In a pervading person culture, the organisation exists only for the people in it with no dominant organisational objective or 'vision'. Handy uses higher education as his example of a culture where individuals exist whose personal preference is for a person culture but who are operating in a role culture. This role culture is typified by hierarchy, decision-making processes (committees, meetings) and systems and procedures for dealing with poor performance. But employees regard the organisation as a base on which they can build their own career and carry out their own interests. They are not primarily motivated to add value to the organisation, although the results of what they do may be, by default rather than design, positive for the organisation. In particular organisations, a person culture could be regarded as an advantage – Handy's own example of higher education is one where it might be argued that pushing the boundaries of critical thinking is, to a degree, dependent on the existence of a person culture – a culture where personal interest and personal drive is important for organisational success and reputation.

Handy points out that individuals with this orientation are challenging to manage, and that there is little influence that can be brought to bear on them. Specialists, experts, people in vocational roles in organisations and people working in creative areas of organisations (e.g. marketing departments in public sector

organisations) may well be more aligned to the person culture whilst working in a role culture, i.e. a culture typified by bureaucracy and working on logic and rationality with people and functions controlled by rules and procedures. There emerges from the data a strong sense of personal frustration and personal desire to get on with meaningful work, and yet there appears to be minimal engagement with the process of organisational improvement.

Despite working within an organisation where one would assume there would be a pervading role culture, given the fact that the council is set up as a publicly accountable and hierarchical, the data suggest that individuals were less motivated by the possibility of adding value to the organisation and were more motivated by their individual needs. There also appeared to be a belief that at the higher levels of the organisation managers are operating a person culture. As set out in the previous chapter, respondents described a range of 'survival' strategies which they employed to help them cope with their lack of understanding of organisational life. These survival strategies involved, to varying degrees, disengaging from the organisation and protecting oneself.

- *'I just do what I'm asked ...I can't do much to change things...'*
- *'I've got some good friends, a lovely office. I've got a salary....'*
- *'People use people to their own ends...'*
- *'The system frustrates change – the same teams are kept – they're still there...'*
- *'There are several types of people in the organisation – the 'careerist' – they want to get on – 'quick wins'. Their motivation is not to improve services. There are the 'journey-men' – they keep doing it – it's safe – like cricket every Sunday. They're not risk takers. Then there are the 'incompetents' – defined by decision avoidance .....*
- *'The system serves the organisation rather than the customers.'*
- *'You know where you are – they can't get rid of you...'*
- *'People are chosen because they please the master...the King's court....'*

For this council, the existence of a person culture is not, I suggest, ideal. The organisation is highly accountable – to elected politicians and to service users. The services it provides are, in some cases, critical to the lives of local people – e.g. emergency housing, social care, education etc. The ability of the council to defend its decisions, to account for its spending and to be open to scrutiny depends, I suggest, on a *workable* role culture, with clear lines of accountability and the existence of *appropriate* and *useful* rules and procedures.

### The cultural web (Johnson)

#### Rituals and routines

Johnson's aspects of culture (as described earlier) have provided me with 'prompts' with which to examine the data. There is little clear evidence emerging from the interviews regarding specific routines and rituals – rather the opposite – the respondents seem to be suggesting a lack of clarity about what is expected in terms of behaviours and have not provided examples of specific events which give clear messages about what is important in the organisation. Many respondents have expressed the view that they don't know why they do what they do or what matters in the organisation – others, while giving examples of events which support their own views of the organisation, have not been able to relate these to organisational priorities or values.

- *'There's no feeling of achievement...'*
- *'There's no clear vision. People are faffing about..'*
- *'Sometimes I wish I had a real job...'*
- *'People getting paid good salaries for \*\*\*\*t all....'*
- *'It's a culture of demotivation – it's encouraged...'*

## Stories

Numerous stories were told – either through metaphor or by citing particular personal experiences of relationships or of career paths. Salzer-Morling (in Grant, Keenoy and Oswick, 1998) describes the telling of stories as a way of making sense. By reconstructing events or actions into a plot, sense is made of organisational life. The process of story-telling is strong within the data and so it can be assumed that the stories and metaphors used were ways with which respondents made meaning for themselves. However, the stories did not provide meaning for me, the researcher. What they provided was a strong sense that this was a culture/climate where there was lack of meaning. The stories were intended to help me (the researcher) understand the root of frustration for the respondent – why they felt the way they did about the organisation – but in general they did not do so.

For example, one respondent talked in detail of a work relationship, where they felt that an individual had not been open with them, leading him to make some errors of judgement in their work. They believed that this individual wanted them to fail, and they used this example to demonstrate the lack of trust and honesty throughout the organisation. When asked if this example had been repeated, their response was that this was the only time this had happened. The evidence presented in the form of a story was not sufficient to support a more general assertion by the respondent that there was lack of trust and honesty throughout the organisation.

*'I've been manipulated. I've known others won't play. I've recorded conversations when I knew she was trying to waste my time. Her earliest course of action was to misguide me. But what were the factors making her become part of the status quo? I don't know....no – not others, no – but this is a good example...'*

Another individual told me about their career journey and about how many times it had been frustrated by lack of promotion or lack of opportunity. When asked how this related to their perception of the organisation as corrupt, the response was that this was good enough evidence.

*'The organisation has moved me around – it's out of my hands...The organisation puts you in boxes. I'm not a consultant so I'm not as good....I'm not a novelty so I won't get jobs....I think I should get an MBA but then I wonder what on earth I'm doing that for!'*

It seemed at the time that those respondents telling stories were using the stories as a way of taking a 'short cut', i.e. 'making meaning' to support a set of perceptions. (Deletion and distortion?)

### Control Systems

Control systems were discussed, but again the systems described were not overt systems such as performance management or appraisal systems – rather covert methods of control which people believed existed – very few of these beliefs could be supported by examples:

- *'There are unresolved issues about the culture of the organisation – some people are undermining the delivery of change...'*
- *'It's the behaviour we reward and what we fail to punish...'*
- *'There's a dismissive attitude – if you don't agree you're put down. After a while, I expect, like me, you keep your mouth shut..'*

## Organisational and power structures

This organisation has the characteristics which would suggest a role culture. There exist processes for decision making, a strong hierarchy and control systems. Although power and who has it is discussed by the respondents, it is less on the basis of who has the right to use power and more on the basis of how it is used.

- *'There's a club atmosphere and hierarchical distinctions. A feel for who's in and who's out...'*
- *'The buddy-buddy thing between directors...'*
- *'There are chains of abuse here....the abuse goes right down to the customers....'*

Whilst tacitly accepting that there is a power structure (none of the respondents questioned the hierarchy or structure of the organisation and the methods by which decisions are supposed to be made), they questioned the motives and the values of those perceived to be higher in status in the organisation. However, this is further complicated by the fact that those senior managers at the very top of the organisational structure who were interviewed also raised the same concerns; the following quotes are from senior managers:

- *'there is a lack of consistent staff management/staff care...'*
- *'the leaders – their objectives and behaviours bear no relation to the jobs people are trying to do...'*
- *'to be 'in' – it's something similar to a class thing...'*
- *'there's a fear that you are basically \*\*\*\*ed if you don't get on with your manager'.*

Johnson's culture web is useful in that in re-visiting the data it becomes clear that respondents had little to say about the overt systems, processes and

structures making up the organisation – but they had much to say about covert values, beliefs and behaviours that they were trying to understand but were sure existed and were driving the organisation. It was the covert culture which seemed to be causing people most discomfort – both in their attempts to define it and in terms of their own beliefs about the way things worked.

### Overt v covert cultures (Egan, Argyris, Schein)

Many writers have explored the notion of the dual cultures existing within organisations – the culture which is espoused, i.e. this is the way we do things around here, and these are our values', and the culture which stays in the shadow.

If we were to apply the acting model, we might call this the text, i.e. what is written down and spoken and acted on in the workplace, versus the sub-text, i.e. *'the combination of inner monologue and mental images – the sum of our mental activity during the dialogue'* (Benedetti, 1998). Broekstra (In Grant, Keenoy and Oswick, 1998) describes the organisation as both tacit and explicit – the tacit organisation representing the deep, natural systems and the source of organisational life, and the explicit represented by systems, processes and interaction.

My research appears to have identified that whilst the organisation had espoused visions, values, performance plans and targets, and processes by which people were managed and monitored and information was shared – this is not what respondents were seeing as the 'truth' of this organisation's life. What the truth was, however, appeared to be difficult for them to identify.

The force driving this organisation was, then, the covert or tacit culture – not what is espoused, but what really happens. This covert culture, however, remained unclear, but is directly influencing the climate of the organisation. As



stated earlier, respondents were unable to capture examples of behaviours or interactions to support their assertions about being in a 'game', or about lack of sense of direction or lack of understanding of the rules. When asked to elaborate, using a recent incident to support their views, they were unable to. On the few occasions that specific examples were given, these examples did not entirely support the assertions made about the organisation and the way it conducted itself. The use of metaphor by respondents, as discussed earlier, remained ambiguous and elusive and did little to identify what it was respondents felt they needed to know. Arguably this is because what they were trying to articulate was something which was 'invisible'.

The dominant belief emerging from the data appeared to be that something or several things were unknown, and that these 'unknowns' were the secret driving forces behind organisational life.

What is interesting is that all respondents believed in these 'unknowns', citing them as the reasons for their unhappiness or dissatisfaction, and the reasons for the way they now had to 'survive' within the organisation. These 'survival' mechanisms, e.g. establishing close personal relationships with other team members; focusing on 'hygiene factors' (Herzberg, 1966, to be explored in detail later in this chapter); concentrating on areas of work within their own control, suggest the emergence of a person culture within the organisation.

#### Other ways of looking at culture/climate

Morgan's (1998) image of organisations as psychic prisons, and his use of the allegory of the cave in Plato's *The Republic*, is interesting when considered alongside the data. There is, from the data, a tacit agreement amongst all those interviewed that the 'shadows', as described in the allegory of Plato's cave, are the reality.

The inability of respondents to explain what they meant by their metaphor, or to provide examples of behaviours to support their assertions, could suggest an unwillingness to let go of a familiar way of seeing things, or the inability of respondents to provide examples of things they did not understand.

Morgan suggests that the psychic prison metaphor encourages us to challenge our basic assumptions about how we see and experience the world – to ask ourselves why we get trapped in particular ways of thinking and of seeing the world. He talks of a self-sealing environment, one where attempts to change perceptions can mobilize high levels of opposition. His perception is interesting, in that those new members of staff interviewed have learned quickly that they must learn to see things in a particular way.

- *'...the majority of people are operating like that – adopting certain ways of working and thinking, then the minority has to conform...'*
- *'I'm actively trying to be this way in order to fit in. ....there's a mask I must wear...'*
- *'If I stay too long I'll become a cynic...'*
- *'It's like assimilation – we become cynical...'*
- *'My energy levels have gone down – I'm colluding...'*

He warns that there is a balance between rational and irrational, and that what can appear to be irrational will often be a powerful force within an organisation. His message is a reminder not to dismiss the seemingly irrational, unsupported statements and perceptions, but to remember that to over-rationalise our understanding of organisational life is to deny the fact that there are human forces within organisations that we cannot order or control (or, indeed, label).

Whilst the data at times suggested a lack of reality, or at least the inability of respondents to give examples of specific situations, it remained important that, as a researcher, I did not deny the validity of what has been expressed, even

though my attempts to obtain evidence to support statements have predominantly failed. As discussed earlier, it is difficult to provide an accurate description of something which is 'invisible'.

Kets de Vries and Miller (1984) talk of shared fantasies and group processes - the coming together of common perceptions and shared fantasies. The use of metaphor by participants together with sometimes seemingly irrational assertions which could not be supported by examples or other forms of evidence suggest a strong set of belief systems/shared fantasies and self-sealing behaviours, reinforcing the culture of the organisation. The view was expressed by some that even though they do not necessarily see things in the same way as others they have learned that they must 'wear the mask'. The neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) perspectives and models, as described in chapter 3 sit comfortably with the notion of shared fantasies, self-sealing environments and the power of irrationality. The processes of deletion, distortion and generalisation appear to be what enabled individuals to defend irrationality, to develop and sustain shared fantasies and to see the shadow as reality.,

Taking Kets de Vries and Millers' five neurotic styles, it could be argued at this point that the weaker aspects of the paranoid style are being displayed, i.e. a lack of concerted and consistent strategy, few distinctive competences and insecurity and disenchantment among managers and their subordinates because of the atmosphere of distrust.

From the analysis so far, the *climate* of the organisation (i.e. the prevailing trend of opinion of feeling in the organisation during this period) is coming across more strongly than the *culture* of the organisation (i.e. the particular form or type of civilization) and this climate comprises:

- paranoia – insecurity and disenchantment due to an atmosphere of distrust, a lack of understanding about the real ‘rules of the game’, rather than the formal or documented ones
- self-centred behaviours, or a ‘person culture’ (taking Handy’s definitions, where he uses the word culture) – individuals now less motivated by the possibility of adding value to the organisation and more motivated by their individual (personal and psychological) needs, and acting accordingly . The *climate* is having a direct impact on this aspect of the culture
- a lack of understanding about behavioural regularities
- a set of beliefs about what is rewarded and what is important, which differs from what the organisation has overtly stated in its values statements, policies and procedures
- a belief that there are covert control systems existing within the organisation, but a level of confusion about what these are.

The reader will note that I have only addressed one half of question one at this point – I will now seek to address the other half.

### **6.2..3 Continual change –what did I mean by that?**

This second part of the question assumes a level of change which may have contributed to the creation of the organisational climate, and to employee perceptions. I now propose to

- re-visit the history of the organisation
- consider key theoretical perspectives on psychological responses to change in the light of the interview data
- reach some conclusions about the level of change and its effect of change on the respondents

The unitary authority was born out of a 'merger' process, and there is no doubt that this local government restructuring exercise was not necessarily seen as the best way forward by those officers and managers charged with making it happen.

Throughout the consultation process leading up to the final decision about how the unitary authority would look, each of the separate councils had been lobbying central government to protect their own interests.

The outcome of the consultation process and the decision to create a unitary authority comprising these particular councils was not to everyone's liking, and this was well known within the council in which I worked. However, once the decision had been made work began to ensure the transition into unitary status.

During the run up to the decision about the composition of the local authority employees at all levels experienced uncertainty. Information appeared to be limited at first, and this was because decisions were yet to be made about structures in the new authority

As outlined earlier, key individuals were to be automatically transferred into the new organisation by virtue of their roles and responsibilities – the 'statutory transfer'. Other employees had to wait for the new organisational structures to be developed and then would have to compete for their posts.

Despite messages about avoiding redundancies, offering voluntary redundancies and protecting salaries for a defined period, staff in the 'prior consideration' category felt uneasy about their futures. Some individuals (myself included) waited until very late in the process to know about structures, posts to apply for and new kinds of responsibility. The loss of control of the process had a profound effect on many people at this point, and it is important to note that the majority of the 'prior consideration' posts were those posts responsible for

organisational development – policy development, strategic management, training and development among others. The ‘statutory transfer’ posts, on the other hand, comprised front line service delivery posts – e.g. social workers, housing officers, revenues and benefits officers, tourism and leisure officers etc.

The direction of attention is different in each case – those people contributing to organisational development should be analysing, challenging and developing systems, processes and behaviours and taking decisions which will impact positively on the organisational culture and organisational success.

Those people providing front line services should be working within legislative frameworks and with best practice to ensure high quality services are delivered to local council tax payers.

It could be argued, then, that those people most able to influence the direction of the new authority and support the smooth transition into unitary status were perhaps experiencing the most acute feelings of uncertainty at this time, and therefore they needed to protect their personal interests by, in some cases, entering into covert competition. Fear and uncertainty in times of change will certainly impact on behaviours, and it is significant that those experiencing the most fear and uncertainty at this time were the more ‘influential’ people in the organisation, by virtue of their roles rather than their status (although high levels of competition took place at the very top levels of the organisation).

Post re-organisation two further significant restructuring exercises were undertaken within a period of three years - between 1997 (the ‘birth’ of the unitary authority) and 2000. The work undertaken, the structures developed and the priorities established within the first 6-12 months in the new authority were scrutinised and changed. Employees experienced further confusion as the senior management team sought to ‘re-shape’ the new organisation as well as re-define the priorities. This was driven by a desire to address issues such as

over-staffing in some areas, poor performance in others and the legacy of three different cultures, being played out in working practices and in the way relationships were developing.

Key areas of the organisation were re-shaped – for example, the personnel function was changed twice, and a rapid change of senior and middle management took place. The personnel function included organisational development, and so this had a significant impact on the ability of the organisation to move forwards.

The situation was exacerbated by the announcement that the Chief Executive now intended to leave. Again, this produced feelings of uncertainty and fear – and these feelings existed for individuals in the most influential parts of the organisation – specifically directors of departments.

The results of the peer review of March 2001 (as set out in Chapter 1 of this thesis) are interesting reading in the light of this backdrop – namely the development of a strong inward focus; ‘silo’ mentality of departments; lack of follow-through; transactional rather than transformational leadership etc.

It would seem, then, that at the time of researching the organisation (i.e. from October 2001 to March 2002) the significant, sometimes unpredictable and perhaps poorly led and poorly managed change spanning the period 1996 to 2001 had had a significant impact on employee perceptions – from the ‘top’ of the organisation to the very lowest levels. More change was on the horizon, with the appointment of a new chief executive and another re-structuring process on the cards.

Hayes (2002) reminds us that those managers who expect relief and gratitude from staff who remain in jobs after a process of restructuring may well find that this is not the case. He quotes Doherty and Horsted’s (1995) research on the

'survivor syndrome' where survivors may respond in a number of ways – ranging from shock, anger, animosity towards management, guilt, concern for others, anxiety, relief or fear. These are certainly responses I can recall, as a 'survivor' – certainly the physical symptoms of shock after reorganisation (I became ill); some anger about lack of recognition of the work I had done; some guilt that I had done better than others; a level of relief that it was all over and anxiety about any more change. I also held management in lower regard.

In the case of this local authority it can be assumed that these feelings would not have been confined to those people being managed, but would have been experienced by people at all levels within the organisation. So where were staff directing their animosity?

Further analysis of the data suggests a level of frustration and anger at all levels – front line service providers and staff who were least affected by the change were angry that they were not being heard or listened to. The quotes below are from housing officers, social workers, tourism officers etc:

- *'I find out about new initiatives or ideas that involve me after they are implemented...'*
- *'I feel isolated....'*
- *'We're isolated in our roles...'*
- *'I belong to just a small part of the organisation. Not the whole organisation...'*
- *'People forget we're here to provide a service...'*
- *'The organisation has lost it – it doesn't value the people within it...'*

Middle management, strongly affected by the changes – many of whom had to compete for their jobs and who were working to secure their positions prior to the change of Chief Executive, provided a slightly different response. Here are some examples:



- *'There are lots of organisational problems and they are now coming to a head ....my position is insecure...'*
- *'How I feel varies – sometimes autonomous, highly motivated, energised, but when push comes to shove it makes you feel vulnerable – there's no sense of place...'*
- *'People are frightened. There's mistrust. People are making pitches – they are insecure – people are unsure about their position...'*
- *'Instability – this place does nothing but reorganise...'*

Senior Managers, i.e. strategic directors, also affected by the changes – having to compete for jobs, justify their position, defend the performance of their departments, had this to say:

- *'....the vision is less than clear, more about meddling....'*
- *'Very low performance – at strategic director level too – an unwillingness to take responsibility or risk – everywhere....'*
- *'I wanted us to invest in staff and model the behaviours required...'*
- *'Staff should be left to make decisions – this has disempowered them. They don't feel trusted....'*

(N.B only two strategic directors were interviewed – the Strategic Management Team comprised 8 members at the time of this research).

There are variations, then, in the responses – but a clear sense of 'survivor syndrome' existing within the organisation as a result of the changes. At front line service delivery level it would appear from the data that staff felt isolated and not involved in the decision-making processes. This is likely to be the case, given the change of management focus during the periods of change. Managers are likely to have been busy 'making pitches', as described by one respondent.

The overwhelming response from middle management was one of disappointment with the lack of trust and the feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. The history would suggest that these feelings have developed as a result of the high levels of change and uncertainty. The two strategic directors interviewed expressed their frustration at the lack of vision, poor organisational performance and lack of staff care. The words 'they' and 'people' were used a great deal during the interviews, and when pushed, participants could not identify who it was they were talking about.

'They' were described in a number of ways – the 'pen-pushers', the 'journey-men', the 'resisters to change' etc. It remains unclear as to who respondents were directing their animosity towards – sometimes during interviews it felt as if everyone and no-one was responsible.

- *'some of the critical mass are subversive – the 'wreckers'*
- *'I'm not part of it – but maybe I am.....What I need to know is what I have to do to not be part of it....'*
- *'We must all be doing it, but subconsciously. We are being 'cloned'.*
- *'No-one wants to do the drudgery – they all want to do the planning....'*
- *'I have no part in it....'*
- *'I don't believe we have to be like this but I feel intimidated at the prospect of attempting to fix something beyond my powers....'*
- *'I don't know who they are...who are they? You tell me!'*...
- *'Who understands the whole? No-one!'*
- *'They make me do this to other people....'*
- *'Who's in charge?'*

When asked to identify where the responsibility for the organisational challenges lay, respondents were unable to be specific, but many put the responsibility at the door of 'management' , or 'leadership' – described by some as 'the top'.

No individuals were cited and when pressed to identify a particular person or group of people most of those interviewed did not have an answer. Of the 50 interviewed, only 5 identified specific individuals – all 5 identified the new Chief Executive – not as the person responsible for the current 'state' of the organisation, but as the person they believed could fix it.

- *'It's the whole.-.the culture. It starts at the top. Doing it badly is fed down. I'm doing it badly – person to person to me – 'throwing the shadow'. I'm just passing on the \*\*\*p from above.'*
- *"A really strong leadership capacity to manage change within the authority – we don't have that. We don't have that skill or track record...."*
- *'Weak people at the top with little integrity.'*
- *'It starts at the top....managers are not held accountable...'*
- *'There's something missing at the top...'*
- *'Will he (CE) be overpowered? I hope not.'*
- *'I'm inspired by the new CE – I could get excited again..'*
- *'CE, maybe? A light?'*

An illuminating aspect of the data was how change was perceived by the respondents. There appeared to be some clear messages emerging about what had or had not changed within the Council. Interviewees, whilst acknowledging the amount of recent change they had experienced, predominantly expressed the view that very little had changed as a result of all the change. This seemed to disappoint them.

The word change was used a significant amount during the 50 interviews undertaken – 165 times – more than any other word which may have been used to explain the organisational 'state' – for example management, leadership, power, relationships, trust etc.

- *'Resistance to change. People are threatened. We've been through such a lot..'*
- *'There's fear of change – I don't believe in anything beyond self preservation and reproduction....'*
- *'The overwhelming culture is to keep things the same...'*
- *'What causes pain is the lack of the new, the lack of change. Even after all the change. It's the same story, different day...'*
- *'I ask myself why I've been here so long. We never see the results of change. I feel cynical about change...'*
- *'There is a critical mass of people who won't change....the majority of the organisation...'*
- *'To watch change – or no change...'*
- *'In acute moments of anxiety there is not good management of change on a day-to-day basis. There is a flight/anxiety atmosphere...'*
- *'I'd genuinely like to be asked for my opinion and see something change as a result.....'*
- *'We haven't made a difference in my area and no-one cares, so why should I?'*
- *'An asteroid – to change things!'* (respondent felt that this was needed)
- *'Reverse this current cock-up. Go back to how things were and to a much more thorough plan for any future changes...'*
- *'The system frustrates change.....'*
- *'No more change – stick with things now...'*

So, despite a great deal of change, some of which was externally imposed and some of which was driven by the desire to get structures and functions right following reorganisation, the view expressed by the majority of the respondents was that very little had changed. (Re-arranging the deckchairs on the Titanic?) Respondents were very familiar with change, and without any prompting this was raised repeatedly throughout the interviews.

There is a strong theme emerging from the data here. It is true to say that the organisation, at the time of the research, had been through a great deal of change. It is important to note, too, that the changes focused on in this thesis do not include the changes and challenges faced by each authority prior to reorganisation – compulsory competitive tendering, legislative changes, budget restrictions, re-structuring processes that had taken place in each authority before reorganisation was on the agenda, etc. Certainly in my own local council there had been a great deal of internal change (re-structuring), as well as imposed procedural and legislative changes.

What is interesting is that despite all the change the majority of respondents seemed disappointed with the outcomes. They believed that very little had changed for the better – many expressed the view that there had been no change, or that real change was being frustrated by people or systems. What they seemed to be describing was the existence of resistance to behavioural or cultural change within the organisation, even though much structural change had already taken place. Perhaps what had *not* changed was the *climate*.

### Losing the 'Plot'

Sennett's (1998) work on the effects of constant change on people is illuminating in the context of this study. Sennett asserts that for most of us there is a strong need for order and some predictability in our lives – a sort of life 'story', and faced with too much change/disruption we can lose a sense of who we are and where we are heading.

He reminds us that institutions, as a result of change, can become dysfunctional .... business plans are discarded and revised, benefits turn out to be short lived and the organisation loses its sense of direction. Surviving workers may well simply be waiting for the next 'blow of the axe' (Sennett, 1998, pp 50) rather

than celebrating the end of the change process and moving into the future. This fits with Hayes' (2002) perspective outlined earlier in this chapter.

His key message, however, is that being continually exposed to risk and change can erode one's sense of character. The sense of always starting again, he asserts, is highly detrimental to individuals, in that they develop feelings of worthlessness and invisibility. The questions raised by this experience is, he says 'Who needs me? What am I here for?'

This perspective rings true for the organisation in question. Interviewees repeatedly expressed their feelings of powerlessness and invisibility, and lack of understanding about what they were supposed to do:

- *'I am powerless'*
- *'No-one can say what they really want me to do'*
- *'I feel not valued really'*
- *'It seems that people don't feel ownership or input'*
- *'Lack of clarity re objectives.....'*
- *'I don't want this. I want an equal relationship'*

It seems from these examples that Sennett's assertions regarding the effect of change on individuals may be reflected in the data.

An additional issue to consider, in the context of Sennett's work, is that of role ambiguity – as described by Beehr (1995). Beehr reminds us that some prediction of what is expected, combined with a clarity about what is expected, the existence of procedures for handling situations and sufficient information are key factors in reducing stress related to lack of clarity about our role. The data certainly suggest that respondents are unclear about their contribution, what is expected of them and what the rules and procedures are. Fisher and Gitelson

(1983) suggest that this ambiguity leads to tension, anxiety and a desire to leave the situation.

### Deep change or slow death

Quinn's (1996) view that there are choices between 'deep change' and 'slow death' does not necessarily contradict the messages in Sennett's work, in that he observes that most of us build our identities around our knowledge and competence in employing certain known techniques or abilities. He asserts, however, that in order for real, or 'deep' change to take place, these must be abandoned by individuals, and real uncertainty must be faced. He suggests that individuals will avoid this and choose, as he puts it, 'slow death' because deep change is a frightening choice. In taking the decision to keep things the same individuals are likely to deny that there is any real need for deep change. Quinn suggests that deep change can take place at any level in an organisation, regardless of leadership or role models, and his work will be re-visited later in this thesis, as possible interventions are explored. Judging by the data, it would seem possible that the changes made within this organisation were not, to use Quinn's terminology, 'deep', and that many respondents are aware of this.

*'What causes pain is the lack of the new, the lack of change. Even after all the change. It's the same story, different day...'*

*'I ask myself why I've been here so long. We never see the results of change. I feel cynical about change...'*

There is no doubt that interviewees were experiencing high levels of uncertainty, in relation to their security within the organisation, their roles and responsibilities and their relationships, and it can be assumed that this is as a result of re-organisation and re-structuring exercises where individuals witnessed others losing jobs or status. A large number of respondents talked about change – it was the dominant theme throughout the interviews. However, the extent to

which individuals had been prepared or able, as part of the change process, to abandon old ways of doing things and old knowledge is questionable.

### Career Anchors

Schein's (1988) work on career anchors fits with Quinn's assertion that individuals rely on specific knowledge, competence and abilities to shape their identities, as well as Sennett's belief in the need for some sense of predictability and linearity in their working lives. Sennett uses the analogy of acting – drawing on Diderot and applying it to industrial labour.

*'In his Paradox of Acting, Diderot sought to explain how the actor or actress gradually plumbs the depths of a part by repeating the lines again and again. And these same virtues of repetition he expected to find in industrial labor'.*

Sennett, 1998, p.34

This repetition, asserts, Sennett, is what makes workers into experts, provides them with a sense of self worth and a clear identity, and so will increase their resistance to change.

Schein talks of career anchors – those self perceived talents, motives and attitudes, based on early working or career experience, which provide us with personal security and will increase our resistance to change.

He suggests that there are many kinds of career anchors, such as service to others, ideological, political causes or power, and that these anchors reflect the search of every human for a clear and workable self-concept – a search, he suggests, that may continue throughout life.

There is much in the data to suggest that although large and small scale changes have taken place frequently within the organisation, very little in terms



of working practices or attitudes has changed. This appears to disappoint the respondents. Surface as opposed to deep change seems to have been the outcome.

Whilst seeming to acknowledge this, very few participants were willing to challenge the status quo themselves, and those who claimed that they had reported that they had been ignored or controlled in some way by others, and that they were unwilling to try again.

- *'I've taken the role of down-trodden partner – I reinforce things...'*
- *'I've decided I don't give a \*\*\*\* for now – I don't want to be involved...'*
- *'I swing between needing to become more centred and then adapting to the organisation...'*
- *'I don't challenge.....there's a fear of challenge...'*
- *'I don't know how to challenge it – it's crazy....I feel helpless – I don't know. I don't know about my part – I'm not aware of what I do to continue it...'*
- *'I do attach ego to seeing things change. I want to have a positive effect. I will challenge people. ....I live in constant fear because I challenge so much.....it's a lonely position...'*

On the surface, respondents appeared to be unwilling to create change themselves by challenging the status quo. This might suggest that personal 'anchors' were keeping people operating in the same way, despite the fact that the organisation had changed significantly. Why was this? Could it have been because of a lack of direction or purpose? If so, where did this responsibility lie? I will address these questions later in this thesis.

## Personal Transition

Kubler-Ross (1969) studied personal reactions to terminal illness and other traumatic losses, and identified a predictable sequence through which individuals pass when they suffer major trauma or loss. Harrison (1995), in his *Collected Papers*, says this about Kubler-Ross's work and its relationship to organisational life:

*'I do not think it is far fetched to state we are suffering just such reactions to traumatic loss as our dreams fade, our cherished institutions work less and less effectively, and scarcity takes the place of abundance. Since we are not one individual but a multitude, all of the emotional manifestations can be found at once, rather than in an ordered sequence'*. Harrison, 1995, p. 179

This perspective on the effects of change on individuals has been explored repeatedly by those writers on organisational change – some of whom refer directly to Kubler-Ross, others who have developed their own perspectives on what happens to people in change, and how to reduce resistance to change. For example, Senge (1999) tackles the issue of fear and anxiety in recipients of change; Hayes (2002) provides models of transition which have been informed by the work of Bridges (1980, 1991); Adams et al (1976) looked at changes in self-esteem experienced during transition, and Kotter (1996) explores the issue of resistance to change in the context of his eight necessary steps.

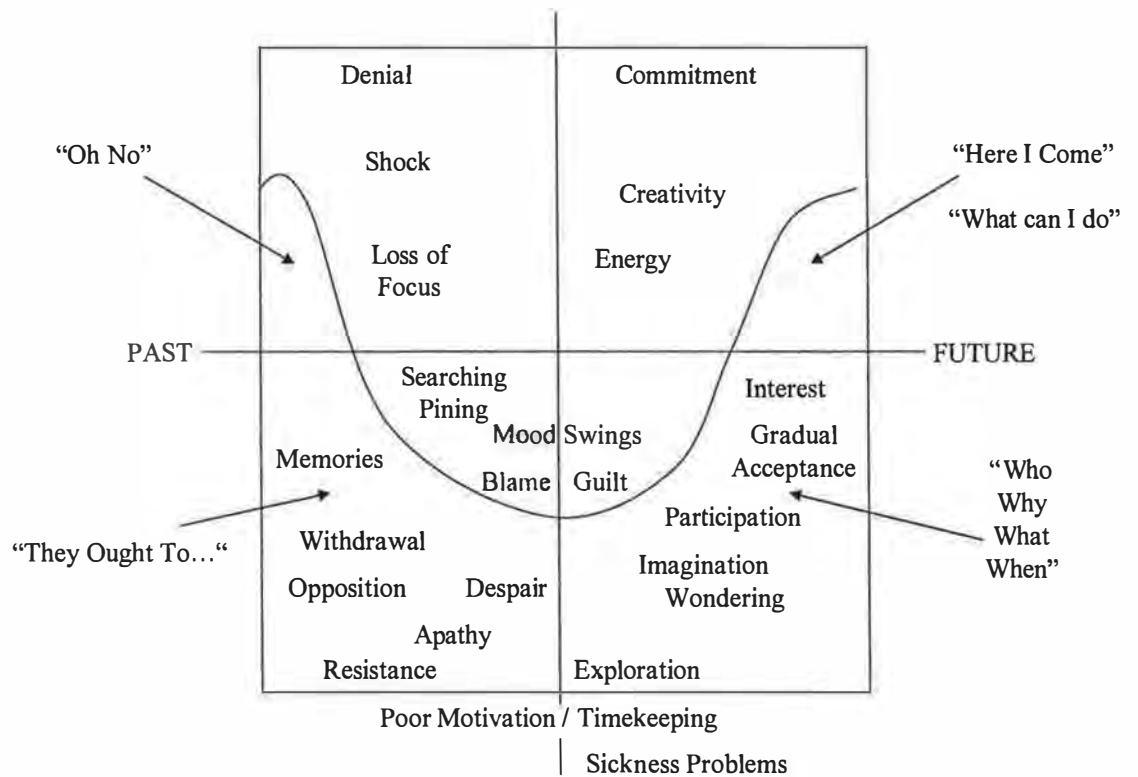
These issues will be re-visited in the concluding chapter of this thesis, when some consideration will be given to the perspectives of writers such as Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974), who talk of the need for spontaneity and less planning for personal change.

Figure 5, entitled 'transition' (*'the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the situation'* (of change), Bridges, 1995:3) is designed to represent this personal transition as described by Kubler-Ross, Bridges et al, and re-applied to organisational life by a range of writers on change. Internal reactions as well as external behaviours are represented, as a way of explaining the transition process. The retention of old skills and knowledge in the new world could be regarded as a strategy of resistance to real or 'deep' change, and the causes of this behaviour may well be the pace of change, the experience of disappointment, the long periods of instability and the resulting climate of uncertainty and confusion.

Figure 5, based on the writings on change, provides some clues as to the prevailing 'climate'. It would seem, from the data, that respondents were experiencing feelings of apathy, despair, depression and low levels of motivation – putting them at the bottom left hand quadrant of the transition 'grid'. These feelings were being displayed by use of words such as 'they ought to' or 'whoever is the leader should...' as well as overt expressions of despair/depression:

- *'I feel let down'*
- *'I am powerless'*
- *'I despair'*
- *'...I feel bloody awful..'*
- *'it feels personally destructive...'*
- *'I just don't think I've ever known anything like it..'*

**Figure 5 – Transition**



**“Descending into a valley & back out again”**

**“Leaving ☒ Transition ☒ Arrival**

Source: Jenny Knight (2005) to represent the writings of Kubler-Ross (1969), Senge (1999) Bridges (1995), Hayes (2002) et al

#### 6.2.4 Summary of response to question 1

My original question was **'is the culture of the organisation a direct result of the continual change?'** My conclusion is that the climate of the organisation can be described as follows:

- paranoia – insecurity and disenchantment due to an atmosphere of distrust, a lack of understanding about the real 'rules of the game', rather than the formal or documented ones
- self-centred behaviours – individuals now less motivated by the possibility of adding value to the organisation and more motivated by their individual (personal and psychological) needs, and acting accordingly
- a set of beliefs about what is rewarded and what is important, which differs from what the organisation has overtly stated in its values statements, policies and procedures
- a belief that there are covert control systems existing within the organisation, but a level of confusion about what these are.

This climate has developed as a result of the continuous change experienced by employees within the Council, and that much of the self-centred behaviours are a direct manifestation of resistance to more change and uncertainty, or learned behaviours as a result of past experiences (this will be explored in more detail in the following chapter).

The lack of understanding of what the organisation stood for, and the belief that there were 'rules of the game' known by some but not all suggest an organisation which had temporarily lost its identity. This loss of identity may well have been as a result of continuous change and personal (survival) agendas taking precedence over organisational priorities. These survival agendas may have been what prevented any real or lasting cultural or behavioural change

within the organisation – and the fact that respondents saw little or no impact of change in terms of behaviours or the development of a clear culture, seems to have disappointed them. It could be argued, then, that they were, to some extent, the architects of their own destiny. This will be explored in much greater depth in the following chapter.

In chapter 1 of this thesis I described the organisation as ‘fragile’ or ‘unresourceful’. This was based on information emerging after restructuring indicating that senior managers believed the new authority lacked a clearly communicated strategic direction for the organisation, and despite espousing certain values the lack of cohesive political and managerial leadership meant that behaviours were not being demonstrated to reinforce these values. In general these views were supported by staff across the organisation. This has also been borne out by what has been articulated in the research interviews. The same judgements were also supported by external consultants, by members of other local authorities while undertaking a peer review and by partner organisations. As outlined in chapter 1, the council was described as process driven, transactional, incremental, operating silo-working and providing poor services because of a predominantly inward focus.

These ‘symptoms’, as described in the peer review, would be manifested by behaviours like those described in the lower left hand quadrant of the transition grid (figure 5).

I intend to re-visit this notion of fragility or unresourcefulness in the conclusions to this thesis, in an attempt to identify the ingredients of a successful or ‘healthy’ organisation. This will enable me to identify possible ways to create climate change.

### **6.2.5 Question 2 - Why is it that respondents are only able to focus on their 'hygiene factors' and seem unable to reach higher levels of motivation?**

This next question is about motivation, and I have, because I was familiar with it, used Herzberg's (1966) terminology in his seminal work on motivation when framing my question. I have also made an assumption about levels of motivation within the organisation by deciding in advance that respondents are operating at base levels of motivation. Again, this is likely to be because of my own relationship with and views about the organisation. I will now test this assumption by exploring some key theoretical perspectives and applying them to the data, before presenting my response to the question.

Herzberg's hygiene theory was developed as a result of research, consisting of interviews with accountants and engineers. Subjects were asked to talk about when they felt good about their job, or bad about their job, and to provide reasons/descriptions of events. The responses revealed that two factors affected motivation at work – one being 'hygiene' factors, comprising the environment, the context within which the work is carried out; the other being the 'growth factors' – i.e. the job content and the opportunity to develop. Herzberg's perspectives have influenced a range of writers on motivation, people and performance management and leadership styles; for example Dean, Brandes and Dharwadkar (1998), Cook, et al (2000) and Crouch (2003).

#### Levels of Motivation

Herzberg suggested that within the workplace managers must provide opportunities for growth and self-development to employees, as well as addressing hygiene factors. It would seem that my question is based on the belief that respondents were not focusing on growth and self-development, but only on their work context.

Before examining the data in more detail, more exploration of some of the literature in the area of motivation would seem appropriate. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on the seminal works of writers such as Maslow (1987), Alderfer (1972), Vroom (1964), Porter and Lawler (1968), Adams (1965) and Heider (1958), who have influenced more recent writers in the areas of, for example, attribution, trust and the psychological contract. These more recent perspectives will also be studied in more detail during this and subsequent chapters.

Alderfer (1972), like Maslow (1987) and Herzberg, suggests that people move through the hierarchy from the bottom line need to exist, through to wishing to have relationships and then to a desire for personal growth and development.

He suggests that if an individual is unable to satisfy higher order needs (relationships, growth or development) then lower order needs may well become the main focus of the person's efforts. Higher level needs may be satisfied outside of the workplace if they are not addressed in the work context, and even after lower level needs are met, there is some passage of time before higher level needs emerge. The length of this time is unclear. These perspectives relate well to the differences between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation – i.e. motivation related to tangible rewards and that which is motivated to psychological rewards, i.e. the opportunity to develop, the experience of receiving appreciation etc. These rewards are mainly determined by the actions and behaviours of managers.

Before addressing some more examples of more literature relevant to the study of the organisation's motivation levels, the data can now be re-examined in the context of Herzberg's hygiene theory, and its relationship to both Maslow's hierarchical needs and Alderfer's work on how needs are satisfied, and the movement between levels of need.



Respondents expressed their views of how motivated they were in a number of ways – many provided the most useful information when asked the question ‘What makes you happy?’ The following responses represent the general tenor of the answer:

- *‘the people I trust – the 5%’.*
- *‘Flexi-time. Family-friendly policies’.*
- *‘Home – and some of the people here’.*
- *‘The people – and leaving’.* (this was an ex member of staff interviewed)
- *‘The people I work with – it’s packed full of wonderful, talented, intelligent people. Working with them has been a joy’.*
- *‘I like working for public services – or I did’.*
- *‘I’ve got some good friends, a lovely office. I’ve got a salary. Not a lot. Just the money’.*
- *‘The canteen. It rocks my world’.*

Many others spoke of their desire to see something change, or the pleasure they had had when something had changed for them, or when they felt they had made an impact:

- *‘Something actually changing....one case makes it all worthwhile...’*
- *‘If I’ve made a difference – however small!’*
- *‘When I can change things. Success through adversity. Recognition’.*
- *‘Development opportunities’*
- *‘The best days are when I’ve had real conversations – meaty ones – on the same wavelength – then I can be effective again – find a solution again. Managing people, problem solving. Coming up with solutions together. But this is not my experience of being managed. She (named manager) is in control mode’.*

In relation to the question 'When you are unhappy, how do you get through your working day?' the dominant response is represented below:

- *'I am grumpy when I feel like it – I act it out on people...'*
- *'I snap. I create an uncomfortable vibe by my behaviour...'*
- *'I stop – I get off the treadmill – I do need to..'*
- *'I recharge my batteries by doing easy jobs...'*
- *'I tend to fritter away the day instead of being useful – I read all my e-mails.'*
- *'Work is work – it's not my life...'*
- *'I have a network of mates – we have coffee in the canteen. I moan to people.'*

It would appear from the data that respondents wanted more from the organisation than they currently believed they were getting. They felt happy when they felt they were contributing to change, but most respondents made it clear that this was unusual, but that it stood out as a good experience.

Most of the time it appears that other factors were focused on by participants as ways of maintaining levels of happiness, or just getting through the working day. These factors are representative of lower order needs, using Maslow's hierarchy, and examination of the data shows a strong desire in interviewees to have their higher needs met.

#### The creation of personal boundaries

The fact that respondents coped with unhappiness by either moaning, acting out negative behaviours on other people, or focusing on menial and relatively inconsequential tasks is a cause for some concern. Hirschhorn (2000) talks of

*'alienated workers denying risk by giving up responsibility and by exercising control of the limited workplace and their accompanying dreams'* (Hirschhorn, 2000, p. 37)

He asserts that when people retreat from work boundaries, establishing a boundary which works for them as opposed to one which is task-focused, they psychologically injure their co-workers. Boundaries should, Hirschhorn suggests, exist between the organisations and their environments, and between different divisions and units. These boundaries are the places where decisions are made and where workers defend territory/ideas/practices or resources. When appropriately drawn, boundaries highlight the risks and difficulties people will face when trying to accomplish their tasks. In the case of this council, boundaries are confused and complex; service users, local politicians, a range of departments offer diverse services from housing to tourism (with all the inherent conflicts of interest) central government accountability etc. There are numerous decision making points, and potential points of conflict.

Hirschhorn states that as anxiety levels increase in individuals, who feel unable to work at the edge of these boundaries, new and personal boundaries are created, and aggression which should be levied at task-focused boundaries is turned in on colleagues who are powerless to make decisions or changes.

There is much evidence to suggest that this was the case in this organisation. The peer review (discussed earlier in this work) highlighted 'silo-working' and 'inward focus' as two of the problems within the Council, and from the data we see patterns of behaviour indicating a tendency to psychologically injure colleagues, because to work at the task-focused boundaries is too threatening.

The focus on menial tasks and the comments about the quality of office space, family friendly policies and the canteen suggest a tendency for individuals to

focus on lower level needs in order to motivate themselves, whilst at the same time acting out their frustrations and aggression inappropriately.

Again, this appears to have been happening at all levels and in all parts of the organisation, to some degree or another, and will have reinforced low levels of motivation within the organisation.

### Rewards, Expectations and Motivation

Lawler and Rhode (1976) assert that intrinsic rewards are not taken into account when organisations, jobs, information and control systems are designed, and so intrinsic motivation is often absent in organisations. Intrinsic rewards are not given, Lawler and Rhode assert – they are felt by individuals. This is unlike an extrinsic reward, such as a promotion or salary rise. Performing well, therefore, should be seen as a *rewarding* experience for individuals even though it is not *rewarded*, i.e. no promotion or salary rise is forthcoming.

Sitting alongside this is the psychological contract, explored by a range of writers, such as Schein (1988), Kotter (1973), McBain (1997), Guest and Conway (1999 and 2000) - the need for something beyond pay and terms and conditions – implicit expectations which exist for individuals at work. For example fairness, a level of autonomy, respect, dignity, development, trust etc. The organisation will also have implicit expectations of its employees – for example not to abuse good will, to be loyal, to be trustworthy etc.

According to the expectancy theory of motivation, applied by psychologists such as Vroom (1964) and Porter and Lawler (1968), the motivation to engage in a given behaviour is determined by individual expectations or beliefs about what outcomes are likely to result from behaviours, and whether or not these outcomes will satisfy their needs.

Upon re-examination of the data, it would appear that respondents had low expectations about the outcomes likely to result from their behaviours, and believed that good performance was not rewarded, and therefore not always rewarding. In some cases, respondents expressed a lack of clarity about what good performance would be, or which priorities should be informing their work:

- *'...there's no incentive for me to do things and no disincentive for not doing it...'*
- *'What are my priorities? What matters in terms of my work?'*
- *'I haven't given up – but to the detriment of myself – there's no career progression for me...'*
- *'The \*\*\*\*s I work with have no motivation or commitment'*
- *'...it's a bit sad... the interpretation of what performance means and how it's measured....there are pockets of apathy – big pockets...'*
- *'lack of clarity re objectives, performance management, accountability and really believing the people want you to do the job in the way you are doing. A big personal commitment is required'.*
- *'I expected too much. That people would understand how to do things 'right'. I experience personal disappointment – every day'.*
- *'Competence and incompetence – how is it dealt with?'*
- *'There's no effort to encourage people..'*
- *'There are no rewards. I feel unrewarded'.*

The views expressed provide more clarity about the reasons for the tendency to focus on menial tasks, and the desire to get lower level motivational needs met.

Equity theory, associated with the work of Adams (1965) assumes that one important issue for individuals is what they see when they observe the efforts made by others and the rewards that follow those efforts. They will then

compare this ratio with their own efforts and the subsequent rewards, as well as comparing their own current experience with a past experience.

If the perception is that the ratio of inputs to outcomes favours others this is sufficient to produce changes in behaviour and/or perceptions. The outcomes of the reorganisation process, i.e. that some individuals were working on protected salaries being managed by others earning less than themselves; senior managers acquired good office accommodation compared with overcrowding experienced by large numbers of other workers; pay rises at higher levels of the organisation and very few at lower levels – all these outcomes are likely to have raised questions about the levels of fairness/equity within the organisation, and may well have changed behaviours and perceptions in individuals. The data appear to support the fact that there were strong perceptions that decisions and actions had been and continued to be unfair within the organisation:

- *'There's a cliqueness here...'*
- *'It's too incestuous – it's like a club...'*
- *'Cow-towing to members. The buddy-buddy thing between directors...'*
- *'To be 'in' – it's something similar to a class thing...'*
- *'If you're 'out' you might as well not be here...'*
- *'There's a club atmosphere, and hierarchical distinctions. A feel for who's in and who's out...'*
- *'Money – people getting paid good salaries for \*\*\*\* all. People who work their \*\*\*\*\* off for hardly any money.'*
- *'Managers are not better than you – but they get more dosh.'*
- *'The people in the centre continue their ascendancy – still carrying on...'*
- *'You've got to be 'in' with the core group. Are you one of the gang?'*

## Trust

Herriot (2001) reminds us of the importance of consistent and reliable care and support for employees. This results in a relationship of trust and feelings of security within the organisation. Any relationship is dependent on trust – Herriot describes this as the ‘fundamental glue’ – employees needing to have confidence that relationships are reciprocal – i.e. that management will act on their behalf if they act on behalf of management. Trust is based on experience – if managers have provided levels of support and care through periods of change and uncertainty then employees are more likely to believe that this is what will happen in the future, and so they will more willingly embrace change and work with uncertainty. Herriot talks of identification-based trust – a trust which is deeper – not simply based on the belief that someone will support, protect or care for you, but based on mutual understanding and the ability to anticipate the other person’s wants or needs, and act accordingly. To build trust takes time, says Herriot, and so, he asserts, it is unrealistic to expect individuals, by virtue of the fact that they work for the organisation, to want to embrace change or work towards the achievement of the vision/mission, if they have not experienced behaviours and relationships which have led them to trust their leaders. Cialdini’s (2001) rule of reciprocity accords with Herriot’s assertions – Cialdini states that one of the reasons reciprocation can be used so effectively as a device for gaining another’s compliance is its power.

Examples have been given earlier in this thesis which suggest that there was a lack of trust existing within the organisation, and that there was a perceived absence of reciprocation. Respondents have spoken of lack of reward, of being ignored, or being marginalised at moments when they felt their work or their contribution mattered.

- *‘...out of the blue I’ve discovered I’ve been doing it wrong or it’s not valued...’*

- *'lack of corporate support...'*
- *'Staff don't feel cherished, valued...'*
- *'There are no incentives...'*
- *'I only hate the organisation when I think the organisation is allowing itself to hate me...'*
- *'There is a lack of role models....'*
- *'I'm totally \*\*\*\*ed off – I'm furious that they are acting like kids – unethical and unbusiness-like behaviours'.*

This lack of trust, and lack of reciprocation, may well have developed *prior* to the reorganisation – anecdotal information was provided in the introductory chapter of this thesis which suggests that these attitudes already existed to some degree within all three councils, for different reasons. It would seem reasonable to suggest that the problem was compounded by the reorganisation and subsequent re-structuring processes, and the allocation of resources (office accommodation, parking spaces, salaries etc). The absence of trust, the lack of reciprocation and the low expectations all suggest that the implicit psychological contract had, for these people, been violated.

#### Internal or External Causes – Attribution Theory

Heider's (1958) explanation of attribution theory has stimulated social psychologists (e.g. Martkinko, 1995) to consider further the processes by which people explain their successes and failures. Broadly, attribution theory concerns people's causal explanations for events.

Heider's starting point was that individuals have a need to understand and control their environments, and so will function as amateur psychologists, finding causes for events which are significant for them. Heider suggests that behaviour is determined by a combination of *perceived* internal forces and external forces. Behaviour and intentions, Heider asserts, are judged on past



knowledge and in comparison with other people we know. Meanwhile, the data would seem to suggest reasonable levels of clarity re causes of the organisational problems as described by the interviewees – most people opting to discuss change as a factor (examples given earlier in this chapter). The vast majority of respondents appear not to believe that the problem has been caused by them – rather by external factors or other people. At the same time, the dominant view was that they were perhaps reinforcing these behaviours by their actions, that they had ‘learned’ ways to behave which were not necessarily representative of who they were. However, they did not see themselves as the originators of the problem:

- *‘There are chains of abuse here. I’m feeling abused, but I’m not abusing anyone – but then I am, I must be!’*
- *‘I’m not uncharacteristic of others in the organisation. People tend to do what they feel comfortable with’.*
- *‘I’m part of the system, I know. I don’t like upsetting people’.*
- *‘I’m colluding – my experience is leading to cynicism’.*
- *‘I am part of the problem, but not out of choice. I’m powerless. Probably everyone you interview will say that..’*
- *‘We are being ‘cloned’. It’s modelled behaviour. New people coming in might be defeated by it...’*
- *‘I have no part in it. People see me as human – not a form provider...’*
- *‘They see me as human rather than corporate ‘don’t care’ ....image’*
- *‘I have my integrity but in my behaviour I might not...’*

The fact that respondents overwhelmingly believed that the cause of the problem was external to them, that they were ‘powerless’ to change the situation and that others were experiencing/would experience the same, suggests that motivation levels would be directly affected by these beliefs and expectations – as would the desire to take action to resolve the problems.

## 6.2.6 Summary of response to question 2

My question was **'Why is it that respondents are only able to focus on their 'hygiene factors' and seem unable to reach higher levels of motivation?'**

My conclusion is that the assumption I made in my question that respondents were focusing on satisfying on their lower level motivation needs was, in part, correct. However, the literature on motivation has provided a range of further perspectives to consider, which are set out below:

- There was a strong desire in interviewees to effect change within their work areas, or to feel a sense of achievement at work. This was not forthcoming, which resulted in individuals motivating themselves by focusing on lower level needs, such as their office space, terms and conditions etc.
- It would appear from the data that respondents at all levels and in all parts of the organisation were acting out their frustrations on colleagues who were not necessarily responsible for, or able to change the situation.
- Respondents had low expectations about outcomes in relation to good performance, which affected their motivation to perform effectively and well.
- Respondents were unclear about what good performance would be in the organisation and so were not motivated to try to produce good work
- Respondents, although de-motivated by the above factors, felt very little personal responsibility for the situation. This affected their motivation to attempt to change or challenge the situation. Most interviewees did not feel they could or should challenge the way things were.
- There was a lack of trust existing within the organisation, and this resulted in an unwillingness to take more personal responsibility, since the perception was that 'management' would not protect or support workers, or ensure fairness in their decision making or resource allocation.

### **6.2.7 Question 3 - How much are we feeding our own problem, by acting out negative behaviours, by disengaging rather than challenging and by projecting all the problems onto others?**

This question still contains some tacit assumptions – the assumption if that employees were feeding their own problem, and that they were using the methods described in the question – the question is only really about the degree to which they were doing so. I propose to reconsider the data in the light of a range of psychological, organisational and philosophical perspectives on what makes people tick in organisations, with the intention of reaching a deeper understanding of both the behaviours of the respondents and the drivers for these behaviours. I will present a summary of my response to this question at the end of this process of analysis.

#### The Shadow Side

*'You know the story of the three brick masons. When the first man was asked what he was building, he answered gruffly, without even raising his eyes from his work, "I'm laying bricks". The second man replied, "I'm building a wall." But the third man said enthusiastically and with obvious pride, "I'm building a cathedral." (Taken from Zweig and Abrams (eds), 1991 p. 126).*

This quotation reminds me of a metaphor used by one respondent which seemed to sum up the prevailing feeling amongst interviewees that they were not sure how their work contributed to the whole, or, indeed, what the vision was:

*'It's like someone builds a house and then someone adds some more – knocks down the walls, adds chimney pots, - then you end up with*

*something structurally unsound. Is it a house? A bungalow? What? We keep altering it..... sometimes I feel desperately disturbed – emotionally and personally. I don't consider myself to be the architect. I'm a builder – I'm on windows, or chimneys. I'm involved in alterations. I'm always busy. I don't feel confident to challenge. It sets you apart, makes you other. The danger is I'll be sent off site..... I might make windows and I believe in it – but then I step back and I don't believe it. Who do I find to challenge it? Who do I go to? .....I'm one of the busy people but these days I'm round the back having a fag....'*

This is a shortened version of what was an extremely imaginative and articulate response to a range of questions, and seemed to capture a great deal of what had been, or would be said by other interviewees:

- *'Busy-ness. We're all busy. Doing what?'*
- *'Could the Council do without me? Of course!'*
- *'There's no real feeling of achievement..'*
- *'I can't bring anything to fruition...'*
- *'People are faffing about.'*
- *'...more pilots than Gatwick...'*
- *'We have initiativeitis....'*

So what has created this sense of busy-ness without direction, and what is the response to it?

Shackleton (1991), in *Meeting the Shadow*, asserts that the workplace influences us to behave in certain ways in order to fit in, to adapt and to succeed.

He suggests that all of us attempt to please our bosses, our colleagues and customers, often hiding our more unpleasant characteristics such as aggression,

greed, competitiveness. We will experience the effects of psychological and spiritual compromise when we subjugate too much of ourselves in order to please others. Shackleton suggests that if our shadow side is pushed away too deeply then it can become destructive and take on a life of its own. He also states that employee motivation is tied to shadow material. People wishing to succeed in organisations may have to deny their more caring qualities, and are driven to use aggressive and competitive behaviours to achieve what they want.

There are certainly indications in the data that competitiveness and the desire to 'succeed' have driven certain behaviours within the organisation – the need to be part of the 'club', to be 'in' as respondents have put it – or the basic need to keep or have a job!

It would seem likely that many individuals have embraced their 'shadow sides' and have 'shelved' their ethics in the midst of change and uncertainty. This would have affected their focus on workplace priorities, the organisation's service plans, the direction of the organisation. To some degree it can be conjectured that more effort went into politics at this stage than into real work – this is borne out by some interview responses:

- *'Lots of rhetoric....but it's just rhetoric – it doesn't make any difference...'*
- *'Politics, procedures, red tape – suck up and be nice to councillors...'*
- *'The something missing is actually being able to do anything...'*
- *'We've lost our way'.*

Others, perhaps less affected by the competition (i.e. statutory transfer members of staff, as defined earlier in this thesis) may have wished to please bosses, colleagues and customers by providing high quality services, and have perhaps subjugated parts of themselves during times of change and insecurity, seeking reward for good performance. This reward (in the form of recognition, praise, development etc.), as we have seen from the data, has not been forthcoming

and interviewees expressed a feeling of being let down, and of personal compromise (the following quotes are taken from individuals providing public services, or managing statutory services):

- *'I suffer when I'm not living my ethics and values – but I can't because of the memory of those who lived by their ethics...'*
- *'I've found myself slipping into complacency – I feel bloody awful...'*
- *'I have taken the role of down-trodden partner – I reinforce things, behaviours...'*
- *'To keep your job you have to go along to some degree...'*
- *'Just doing what you're employed to do ends up a bit of a game...'*
- *'They wouldn't listen to me, but would listen to other's views about me...'*
- *'We have given up trying to influence things here – sadly my job is to influence but I have got to the point where I don't feel I have to do much of that either.....'*
- *'Would I have done things differently? No. I'm not enthused by the thought of courting politicians...'*

The data suggest that there was a strong feeling of personal compromise – either to stay in a job or to 'do the right thing', with individuals denying aspects of themselves in order to compete for security. It is possible that this behaviour has taken on a life of its own. Behaviours appeared to be imitated throughout the organisation – regardless of status, experience or agendas. The following quotes suggest a level of understanding that these behaviours prevail throughout the organisation and are being acted out on each other, and the possible consequences:

- *'I'm feeling abused – but I'm not abusing anyone – but then I am – I must be! The abuse goes right down to the customers...'*

- *'I'm part of the problem, but not out of choice, Probably everyone you interview will say that. Even the top managers, maybe. Who is accountable?'*
- *'...I act it out on people...'*
- *'I do it to the people I manage – I look for confirmation of my understanding....to confirm the nonsense...'*
- *'I whinge, moan, rat, hate, undermine, damn, blame, turn someone into a monster...'*
- *'By being an employee of the Council I'm part of the problem – I don't want to be caught in the Council's \*\*\*\*. – just because everyone's miserable around me I don't want to be it ...'*
- *'I was told to do work I thought was \*\*\*\* and I did it anyway...'*
- *'I work within the system but I stay true to myself. I don't feel I've sold myself out. Have others got souls? I see no others with integrity.'*
- *'I am colluding with the problem now. I'm ashamed that the organisation lets this happen – we all drop our ideals – how can we make things change?'*
- *'Why don't I say no?...If you don't challenge it – well I don't – is it my historical \*\*\*\*? I don't know. I'm beginning to do it more.....maybe some affirmation helps before we can challenge. Love, maybe....'*

It would seem that the shadow side of this organisation had taken on a life of its own, and the reasons for this may vary depending on individuals' experiences of the organisational change, and the personal strategies they employed at the time to increase their own feelings of security and to obtain the recognition they needed. Negative behaviours are being reinforced by people throughout the organisation.

## Projection

Goleman (1997), Hirschhorn (1998 and 2000), Hollway (1991), De Board (1978) and many other writers on organisations have explored the concept of projection in relation to organisational behaviours. Goleman provides an understandable explanation in his book 'Vital Lies, Simple Truths', which is headed

*'What is inside is cast outside'* (Goleman, 1997 p. 210)

Hirschhorn (1998) provides anecdotes to explain the process of projection, and revisits the process in anecdotal form in *The Workplace Within* (2000). De Board defines it as an ego defence mechanism- a process by which a person unconsciously attributes to another person a characteristic that is in fact his/her own.

The theory of projection is that it enables us to ascribe to others the undesirable qualities we ourselves have. We tend to see in others our own faults magnified. This defence mechanism can be a retreat from reality.

However, It is useful to be reminded by Hollway (1991), via a case study, of the danger of assuming that the process of projection is taking place. She cites a case where an individual in an organisation makes a complaint about another which is interpreted as projection, rather than accepted as a reasonable complaint. This kind of interpretation could lead to the denial of reality, or truth. To assume that organisations in general are full of people projecting the undesirable qualities of themselves onto others is, for me, a dangerous place to go because I suggest that this assumption can explain everything, and therefore explain nothing. The process of projection *is* likely to exist in this organisation, but there will also be some *truth* attached to particular judgements and comments.



The data provide some clues as the level of projection taking place within the organisation, and the areas where projection is being employed as a defence mechanism.

Respondents have, by and large, acknowledged their own relationship with or contribution to the current state of affairs, whilst at the same time not seeing themselves responsible for the creation of it. They have also acknowledged that they are colluding with the way things are in a number of ways - reinforcing the situation by their own lack of challenge, by acting out their frustrations on others and disengaging from the bigger picture as a way of protecting themselves.

The question which remains unanswered is who is the person responsible or what was the catalyst for the development of this unhealthy climate? Most respondents cited change, and talked of existing negative behaviours, practices and attitudes within the organisation which induced in them a range of emotions – disappointment, anger, despair, confusion, defeat etc.

The nature and scale of change for this Council is clearly a significant factor and has undoubtedly contributed to the climate. The data provide strong evidence that behaviours, practices and attitudes existed at all levels and in all parts of the organisation which served to reinforce this negative climate. Respondents also knew that they are colluding with these behaviours, practices and attitudes, but the dominant view was that it was not their fault that these behaviours, practices and attitudes exist – it was someone else's. It is interesting to note that all the respondents placed the responsibility for the existence of the problems outside of themselves.

This may not always have been the case – i.e. during the change processes it may be that aspects of the changes were mismanaged and that poor decisions were made. It may have been possible to identify key individuals responsible for

this. Respondents have not done this. At the time of the research (i.e. post change and in a period of relative stability – small re-structuring processes taking place and a new Chief Executive having arrived) respondents could not provide concrete examples of misbehaviour with names attached. They have talked about ‘*them*’, ‘*management*’, ‘*people*’, ‘*this place*’. It could be argued that a level of projection is taking place – the responsibility for the way things are is projected onto ‘other people’ – as is the responsibility for changing the way things are.

### 6.2.8 Summary of response to question 3

My question was ‘**How much are we feeding our own problem, by acting out negative behaviours, by disengaging rather than challenging and by projecting all the problems onto others?**’. My conclusion is that the problem was reinforced by behaviours, by disengagement and by a *degree* of denial of personal responsibility (projection) – the following bullet points summarise what seems to have emerged from the data:

- The prevailing view was that the organisation is an unpleasant place to work – dishonest, lack of direction, power struggles etc
- Few (if any) respondents have offered suggestions for change. The dominant response was to disengage (focus on friends, family, filing etc) or to take out frustrations on others – quite often the targets for this aggression are inappropriate – managers to staff, colleague to colleague. Actions taken seemed to relate to a set of beliefs about what they could and could not control, and views about this have been expressed in the interviews. Locus of control will be explored in the following chapter.
- Respondents also knew that they are colluding with these behaviours, practices and attitudes, but appeared confused about, or lacking, alternative options.

- Respondents placed the responsibility for the existence of the problems outside of themselves.

### 6.3 Conclusions – an overall response to all 3 questions

The process of re-visiting the data using three of the questions which had emerged for me during the research process has enabled me to reach certain conclusions about the climate of the organisation; the impact of change on the organisation; motivation levels within the organisation and the positive or negative impact on the climate of current attitudes and behaviours.

The Oxford dictionary definition of paranoia is the '*....abnormal tendency to suspect and mistrust others*'. Kets de Vries and Miller (1984) provide the following characteristics of the paranoid organisation:

*'Suspiciousness and mistrust of others; hypersensitivity and hyperalertness; readiness to counter perceived threats; over-concern with hidden motives and special meanings....'*

They identify the following fantasies existing within a paranoid organisation:

*'I cannot really trust anybody; a menacing superior force exists that is out to get me; I had better be on my guard'*

And the dangers:

*'Distortion of reality due to preoccupation with confirmation of suspicions; loss of capacity for spontaneous action because of defensive attitudes'*.  
(p.p. 24-25)

Based on these two definitions I believe the data show that the climate can reasonably be described as one of paranoia.

This paranoia manifests itself in beliefs about what really gets rewarded as opposed to what should get rewarded; a belief in the existence of covert control systems; a belief that there are other organisational priorities in existence which are not shared and a consequent lack of understanding about what kinds of behaviours are appropriate/acceptable within the organisation. These feelings of paranoia have resulted in self-centred (protective) behaviours, although the council is designed as a bureaucracy and it would be assumed that the dominant culture would be a role culture. This climate of uncertainty and confusion and the resulting behaviours have developed as a result of a great deal of organisational change, which, in the view of respondents, has resulted in very little change. *'same \*\*\*\* different day'*

Resistance to more change is evident in attitudes and behaviours discussed during the interviews – individuals seem to have developed or learned behaviours which are self-protective and which militate against climate change, although most individuals articulated a desire to see some deep or significant changes in attitudes, performance and behaviours.

The organisation was de-motivated – there was very little sense of achievement at work, and so individuals focused on issues which were within their locus of control, i.e. office space, terms and conditions etc. At the same time as creating boundaries for themselves (loci of control) which protected them from the perceived unpleasantness and aggression existing throughout the organisation, there was a tendency for individuals to take out their frustrations and anger inappropriately, directing it at others within their boundaries. The experience of this behaviour reinforced the view, for both perpetrator and victim, that life was harsh and unpleasant within the council. These behaviours were justified by

individuals – *‘they make me do it...’* and this suggests some level of projection as a self-defence mechanism.

Expectations were low in terms of being rewarded for good performance, and there was a lack of clarity about what good performance would look like, and so employees were not motivated to perform effectively, believing that there was no advantage in doing so.

There was a distinct lack of trust within the organisation, and this mistrust would appear to have developed as a consequence of decisions which appear to have favoured people in positions of power. Examples provided earlier were the allocation of office accommodation, and the decisions about salaries and benefits. Respondents generally believed that they had not benefited as much as ‘management’ (which is interesting, since 8 Senior Managers and 2 Directors were interviewed for the research). There was also no feeling of reciprocal support and care – ‘management’ being the target for this criticism. This would suggest the violation of the psychological contract. Respondents did, however, talk of caring for their colleagues/team members. Herriot (2001) talks of trust in the context of parents and children as part of his examination of organisational trust, and his reference to ‘parental duty’ is a useful reminder of Berne’s (1968) work on transactional analysis. Berne talks of events and feelings experienced being stored in us, and replayed, and producing ego states (child, adult, parent). His description of the child ego state seems to fit with the state of the organisation.

Although de-motivated and unhappy, all of those interviewed asserted that they were not responsible for the situation, although they did believe that they were then reinforcing the problem with their own behaviours. They were not, however, motivated to change or challenge the situation, partly because they did not feel powerful enough. More particularly they appeared to believe that the

responsibility for the existence of the problems as well as for changing the situation lay outside of themselves.

This organisational climate would, of course, have manifested itself in performance and behaviours as identified in the peer review, as discussed earlier in this thesis and repeated, for the convenience of the reader, here:

- inward focus
- a vision not fully understood
- 'silo' mentality
- incremental as opposed to step change
- focus on process and structure rather than outcomes
- poor service delivery
- lack of follow through
- lack of risk management
- time and effort wasted on detail
- lack of joined up consultation
- too many procedures, not enough action
- lost opportunities to engage with stakeholders
- transactional rather than transformational leadership
- poor project management

The existence of this climate seems to be as a result of change and uncertainty, and the feelings of disappointment, anger, confusion are not confined to one set of people within the organisation – they are felt by front line service providers, middle managers, senior managers, and temporary staff and ex-members of staff (who have recently left the organisation as a result of the re-structuring processes).

No person or team of people have been consistently identified as responsible for this situation – many respondents looked to 'leaders' or 'the top team' to 'make it

better', and many middle and senior managers looked to other 'leaders' or 'members of the top team' to improve the situation. When asked the specific question 'who would that be?' most respondents did not know. Some held out hope that the new chief executive would be able to improve things.

In the following chapter, I intend to focus on two key perspectives/models, which appear to have some relevance in terms of what is emerging from the data. They are the theories of learned helplessness (in its various forms) and of addiction (both individual and systemic). I will continue to use my original questions as a starting point for further analysis and consideration, specifically the following two:

- *Is it all really a problem, given that no-one seems to be doing anything about it?*
- *Are we choosing to see things in a particular way because it makes it unnecessary for us to actually think?*

# Chapter 7

## In the Groove

### Helplessness, Habit and Homeostasis

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# Chapter 7

## In the Groove

### Helplessness, habit and homeostasis

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*'We are what we repeatedly do.....'*

(Aristotle)

#### 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I propose to examine the data in the light of a range of perspectives on organisational life as well as on human relationships, and to consider the organisation in the light of these. Two key theoretical perspectives/models will then be examined in some detail – specifically addiction theory and a reformulated learned helplessness model (universal helplessness). The applicability of these models/perspectives to the organisation and their relationship to other ways of looking at organisational life, human relationships and human interaction will be considered, with reference to the data and to the description of the climate as set out in the previous chapter. The two questions (numbers 4 and 5) that have informed the identification and consideration of the perspectives to be examined are:

- Is it all really a problem, given that no-one seems to be doing anything about it?
- Are we choosing to see things in a particular way because it makes it unnecessary for us to actually think?

I propose to address these questions in the same way as I have done in the previous chapter, i.e. by considering key theoretical perspectives in the light of the data, in an attempt to find one or more answers to the questions. I will present a response to each question at the end of the process of exploration and analysis, and at the end of this chapter I will present the reader with my overall conclusions.

## **7.2 What we know so far**

Lewin (1947) likens human systems to blocks of ice, describing the way in which they resist change. He asserts that all human systems seek equilibrium, predictability and meaning, and that shared assumptions, developed over time, provide stability and meaning for groups and individuals.

His process of 'unfreezing' provides us with some methods by which we can motivate people to change, and these methods will be explored in the following chapter.

It would certainly appear from the data that this organisation was 'frozen' into specific patterns of behaviour and ways of thinking (shared assumptions). These patterns appear to be damaging the organisation and the individuals within it, but they remain. It is not entirely clear why this organisation could not change, given the overwhelming desire for change, as expressed by the respondents:

- *'We need to take it all to pieces and put it back again...'*
- *'We need to stop re-inventing wheels..'*
- *'We need to be part of the new.. Some kind of belief about creating momentum. All going in the same direction...'*
- *'People need to stop disappearing up their own \*\*\*\*s and make change happen!.'*

- *'We need a better sense of the whole – moving together as one. Even if it's just to shitedom it's better than just fragmenting/dissolving – breaking off in chunks. Chunks are falling away from us'*
- *'The catalyst – the one person or thing. A person or event to get things moving'*

As outlined in the previous chapter, all of those interviewed asserted that they were not responsible for the development of the situation, although they acknowledged their own part in perpetuating the problem. The data show a lack of willingness to change or challenge the situation as the dominant belief was that the responsibility for the situation lies somewhere else – although where this was remains unclear.

The previous chapter also looked at internal and external signs of resistance to change, drawing on the notion of transition. It is as though respondents were sitting in the lower left hand quadrant of the transition grid (figure 5). It seems that the desire for change exists – all respondents said that they wanted things to change - but it is perceived to be someone else's responsibility. There were also high levels of resistance to change existing within the organisation which appear to be as a result of the level and rate of recent changes ('survivor syndrome' as described by Hayes (2002)). So even if someone or something were to have the potential to create change, this may well have been met with a great deal of resistance from the very people who are asking for change. What we see on the surface is not the same as what lies beneath. To want things to change is different from feeling like creating change. We are dealing with the 'invisible', the 'tacit', the 'covert' – the climate rather than the culture of the organisation, and the fact that it persists.

Certain beliefs and patterns of behaviour seem to be emerging from the data, militating against *climate* change – the people interviewed were representative of the thing they were finding painful and unacceptable. It is these patterns of

behaviour and the underlying assumptions/beliefs (the theories in use), which will be further explored and then related to both addiction theory and learned helplessness (in all of its forms)

### **7.3 Question 4 - Is it all really a problem, given that no-one seems to be doing anything about it?**

*'A problem is something you have hopes of changing'*

C. R. Smith

As outlined in chapter 3 of this thesis, before I began the research process I had formed certain hunches about the organisation. These hunches drove my desire to find out more, via research. I believed at the time that the organisation was 'stuck' in repeated patterns of behaviour and displayed levels of motivation which were preventing the organisation from effecting real change. These views led me to consider the applicability of addiction theory to the organisation. However, at the time of research I chose *not* to allow this hunch to inform the nature and design of the research – rather to see what emerged from asking open-ended questions – to find out about the organisation and the people in it without allowing my own views to influence the research process.

I have talked of habitual behaviours earlier in this thesis, and this view has formed as a result of my analysis of the data. What is interesting is that in the process of undertaking the research and analysing the research data I had mentally discarded addiction theory in terms of its relevance to what was emerging. However, further work led me to believe that this perspective was worthy of re-consideration, to try and shed some further light on the data. Patterns of behaviour were discussed by respondents which served to reinforce the problem rather than improve it, and the question emerging for me is whether this problem was being reinforced through choice, or through habit - and if it was through habit, is it reasonable to apply the model of addiction to this

organisation? An answer to this question would provide me with some clues as to whether the problem really was a problem for the respondents, and, if it was, just how serious the problem was. These alternatives (i.e. choice or habit or addiction) will be considered in the light of the work of writers on organisations and organisational psychology, and more general perspectives on human behaviours, as well as by considering the applicability of addiction theory to the data from this research.

### The pursuit of unhappiness?

Watzlawick's account of Mrs. Lot (Genesis 19.17 and 26) riveting her attention to the past and failing to see that the future offers a possible state of 'un-happiness' (p.27) is both amusing and challenging. Watzlawick asserts that by looking away from the past we may well damage the credibility of our pessimistic convictions for the future – i.e. we may see that far from offering more negative experiences, the future holds possibilities of happiness and self-fulfilment. He suggests that we should shield ourselves from the effects of time (healing all wounds) by a) glorifying the past over the present, or b) only focusing on the negative aspects of the past in order to reinforce our view that the future can be no better, or c) holding 'fate' accountable for our situation, and so labelling ourselves 'victims', or d) deliberately looking in the wrong place for solutions, and so only finding more of the same. His message is that all of these strategies will guarantee avoidance of personal responsibility or any engagement in the possibilities of the future. He also writes of self-fulfilling prophecies:

*'...a prediction in the widest sense of the term, that is, any expectation, preoccupation, conviction, belief, or simply suspicion that things are going to take a certain course and not another. It does not seem to matter how these expectations are created – whether by beliefs or*

*suggestions transmitted to us by other people, or by our own inner convictions.....*

*'This assumption will be all the more convincing if more people share it, less so if it contradicts common sense, social rules or past experience...'*

p.60

In his conclusions he refers to life as a game, and suggests that the application of qualities such as fairness, tolerance and trust to behaviours would defeat the game. *'The situation is hopeless and the solution hopelessly simple'*. (p.121).

If it is this simple, then, why were the respondents not behaving in ways which would change the situation? The majority have confessed to being part of the problem – part of the 'system', but have said that this is not what they want.

It would be easy at this point to assume that the situation existed because people wanted it to – it had become a 'comfortable' place to be – familiar, and free from personal responsibility. People have learned to be helpless, learned that things are hopeless, learned distrust and learned that they are not ultimately responsible. And repeatedly telling themselves and each other these things ensured that the situation remained the same. From this perspective, the situation was hopeless but not serious!

This possibility will be considered as we explore other perspectives on human and organisational psychology – however, it is important to keep in mind the damaging effect of the prevailing behaviours and attitudes on performance and service delivery. These effects have been alluded to repeatedly in this thesis, and so it is clear that for many people it would have been very important that the organisational climate changed for the better. The most important stakeholders are the service users – the residents of the local area who require high quality local services. For them, although they may not have known it, this situation

was serious. For the researched, it remains unclear as to whether it really was serious.

### The Avoidance of Action?

*'There is depth in the question "How do I do this?" that is worth exploring. The question is a defense against the action. It is a leap past the question of purpose, past the question of intentions, and past the drama of responsibility. The question 'how'? – more than any other question – looks for the answer outside of us. It is an indirect expression of our doubts...'* (Block, P, 1993, *Stewardship* p. 234)

Block (2002) observes organisations as places which are over-controlled, obsessed with tools and techniques and stifling bureaucracies. His assertion that personal risk, personal values and being driven by what truly matters in life is what will achieve personal fulfilment and organisational success accords with Quinn's work on deep change or slow death, and supports Watzlawick's entertaining take on the pursuit of unhappiness. Block makes the point that the continual focus on other people ('those people') is a defence against our own responsibility. He suggests that it acts as a distraction from choosing who we want to be and taking responsibility for creating our own working environment. He makes the point that no-one changes as a result of someone else's desire, and that we should be focusing on personal transformation as a way of changing our environment – but not worrying about methods – just being clear about our will and our intention. His views are useful in considering the data – the use of the words 'they', 'the top team', 'management', 'people' are scattered throughout the data, and there is little evidence of personal commitment to change. In fact, many respondents have asked 'how?' during the interviews. Again, at this point, we might assume that these people were avoiding action – placing the responsibility for change outside of themselves, and experiencing 'slow death', as described by Quinn (1996).



## Playing Games?

Eric Berne (1968), in his book *Games People Play* describes the SWYMMD game (See What You Made Me do), which can be played out in working life, as well as in relationships between partners and between parents and children. He suggests that blaming others for one's mistakes and behaviours can become self-destructive, and in many cases individuals will become marginalised as a result of this behaviour. Players in the SWYMMD game will differentially allow others to make decisions and then seek to blame them when things go wrong. As we have seen in the data, respondents generally believed that their attitudes and behaviours had been 'brought on' by someone else:

*'I do it to the people I manage – I look for confirmation of my understanding – what are they doing and why? To confirm the nonsense. I tell them they have to do it and I don't know why. They make me do this to other people. I might be doing it but intellectually I have my integrity but in my behaviour I might not...'*

However, respondents have not been marginalised by anyone, because everyone (according to the data) agreed that the fault lies somewhere else. The existence of group-think, belief systems and self-talk ensured that everyone still felt good about themselves and about each other (recall the comments made by respondents about what wonderful people work for the Council), but that they knew they were helpless and powerless to change anything, because it was not their fault. Their behaviours were as a result of what someone or something made them do.

With reference to Berne's work on transactional analysis, there does not appear to be much evidence of the likelihood of adult-to-adult transactions within the organisation, based on the responses in the data – rather the existence of a

'constant child' state. In my initial (frustrated) response to the data (outlined in Chapter 5) I made the following observation in my journal notes:

*'Games exist as long as there are players'*

It appeared from the data that the SWYMMD game was alive and well in the council, and there were plenty of willing players.

### Fear of freedom?

Block (2001) asserts that we are more likely to focus on ways that management needs to control and channel behaviour in the workplace – as if people exercising their freedom could be a problem. He talks of blame and judgement of others as a denial of our own freedom. He draws on the work of Fromm (2002) and discusses the trends towards conformity, the rise of highly controlled institutions and, most importantly, the tendency of human beings to rationalise away their free will, 'escape freedom'. Block's case study (Helen) provides a good example of behaviours being perceived as being 'caused' by others, or by circumstances, rather than an expression of free will. It also illustrates the collusion – the example is of an individual 'living' with a problem for some time before confronting it. In other words, the individual had a hand in creating the problem.

Fromm (2002) talks of manipulation and instrumentality in the workplace; a spirit of indifference pervading the environment; a place where people use each other. He talks of the lack of human relationships, and a 'deal' done in terms of mutual usefulness. Fromm's view of man 'selling' himself, and feeling himself to be a commodity in the workplace is, he says, the cause of individual's poor relationship with himself. The feelings about self are based on what others think of the person – how useful they are, how valuable they are. Again, Fromm's

work relates well to the work of Sennett, who explores the notion of corrosion of character as a result of change, and a sense of invisibility.

The data appear to be representative of these perspectives – respondents have talked about having to be ‘in or out’, being ‘measured in everything’, being employed to tell lies, being ‘in a game’ etc. It would appear that respondents did not have a strong sense of their personal freedom – perhaps as a result of losing a sense of ‘self’, or of personal identity (as described by Quinn). On the other hand, it could be that respondents were choosing to deny their own freedom, because with it comes personal responsibility for their situation.

### Denial of the Truth?

Goleman’s (1998) book ‘Vital Lies, Simple Truths’ reminds us of our ability to deny pertinent facts by unspoken agreements, or via group-think. In a group, feelings of safe, or cosy, unanimity stand at the opposite end of a continuum with anxiety. A group will maintain its ‘cosiness’, says Goleman, by erecting barriers against information that might upset it. This is collective defensiveness. His assertion is that people are driven to deceive themselves in order to avoid unpleasant facts. We tell ourselves ‘vital lies’. Goleman suggests that simple truths may well serve to counterbalance the ‘inertial pull of collective denial’ (p.245). In this case, the perceptions shared by the respondents were that things are bad and it was not their fault. Perhaps the simple, and unpleasant, truth is that the fault did now lie with them.

Watzlawick’s tongue in cheek suggestion that provided we did not personally have a hand in the original event then we can regard ourselves as ‘innocent victims’ of what has been inflicted on us – in this case by the organisation, and via the ‘unwritten rules’.

Respondents seemed tied into ways of thinking that were preventing them from exercising personal choice, personal freedom, personal responsibility. The SWYMMMD game seems to have been prevalent, as were constant child qualities, the avoidance of action, the denial of freedom, the erection of barriers against unpleasant truths and, as a result, the pursuit of unhappiness. But was this choice or habit or addiction?

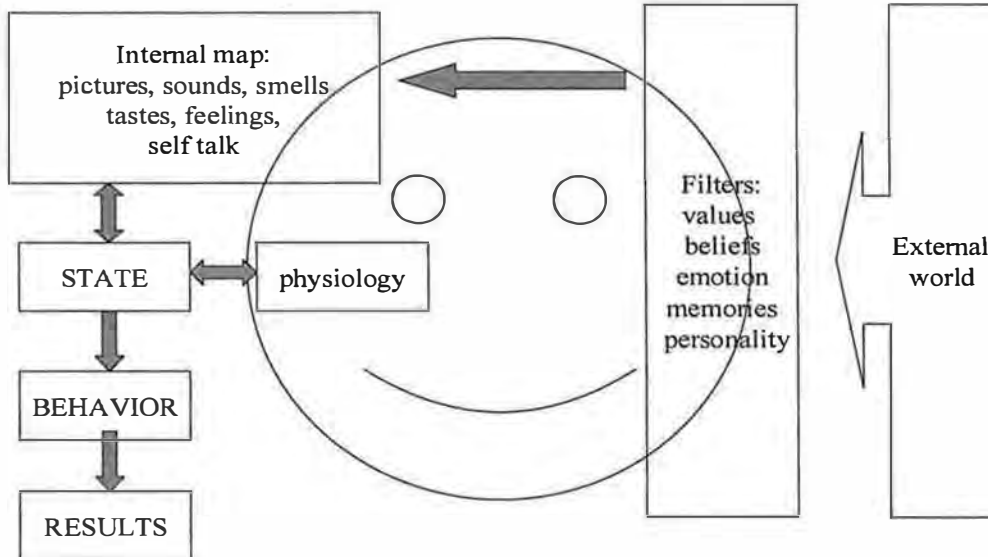
*'Our favoured defenses become habitual mental manoeuvres. What has worked well in key moments, keeping anxiety under control with rewarding results, is likely to be tried again.....'*

*'Successful defense becomes habit, habit moulds style. These familiar tactics become second nature' when psychotic pain confronts us, we fall back into their soothing arms. What may have been at first serendipitous discovery in the battle against anxiety comes to define our mode of perception and response to the world'. Goleman (1998), p. 131*

### **7.3.1 Habit and Addiction – re-visiting the issues in the light of the data**

A range of perspectives on addiction have been provided chapter 2. The perspectives discussed accord with the work done on beliefs as part of the study of neuro-linguistic programming; with the views expressed by Goleman in terms of the desire to deny simple truths as a way a maintaining the status quo; the work of Watzlawick in relation to the sub-conscious pursuit of unhappiness, Berne's SWYMMMD game (among others), and Block's suggestion that the question 'how' is a defence against action. Figure 7 provides a visual representation of the key message emerging from a range of writers. These writers are focusing on human psychology and organisational life from diverse perspectives (e.g. addiction, human psychology, organisational psychology, organisational life and NLP), and yet they appear to all be saying very similar things about the power of personal beliefs, and how these beliefs will influence our behaviours.

**Figure 6**  
 The Dynamics of Viewing the External World  
 Through a Personalised Thought System  
 (Filtering)



Source: Jenny Knight (2005) based on published work of writers in the fields of human psychology and organisational behaviour

Schaef and Fassel's observations of addictive behaviours (i.e. maintenance of the status quo, invalidation, co-dependency and dualism) are useful, but not significantly different from the range of other perspectives on organisational life discussed above. Whether this is because those writers on organisations are missing a trick (i.e. that organisations *are* addictive environments), or that Schaef and Fassel's observations could be explained in other ways is debateable.

The fundamental difference between habit and addiction is important to keep in mind here. Habit is defined as tendency, custom, and practice – addiction as compulsion, with adverse consequences attached to breaking the compulsion.

Aside from respondents' claims that they were 'made' to behave in the ways that they do, or that they just acted out the behaviours they were experiencing on others, there is no hard evidence in the data to suggest that choices about how to behave had been taken away from people. A perception undoubtedly existed that there were 'rules' which must be obeyed, and ways to behave within the organisation which were emulated, but not which should be emulated. When pushed, respondents were unable to tell me who or what was making them do or think the things they did or thought. Nothing, it seems, was *compelling* them, although experiences of the past and learned ways of behaving and thinking in order to avoid more uncertainty and well as survive periods of uncertainty, seem to have become the norm. This, for me, points to *habit* rather than addiction.

### 7.3.2 Summary of response to question 4

My question was '**Is it all really a problem, given that no-one seems to be doing anything about it?**'. To try and make sense of this question I have already considered a range of perspectives which have helped me consider whether this is a matter of choice, habit or addiction. There is no doubt that this problem was serious; the peer review has provided information about the impact of the organisational climate on performance, specifically in relation to service delivery. For the researched, however, it could not be assumed from the data that this situation was really serious – especially given their unwillingness to engage in conversations about personal responsibility or personal change.

The temptation is to assume that the situation existed because people wanted it to; that there were rewards attached to maintaining the status quo. The rewards were likely to have been the avoidance of more change and more uncertainty – and given the pace and scale of change within the organisation and the negative experiences and feelings associated with this change, then this was a reward worth pursuing. Here, then, we may be seeing an element of choice attached to the perceptions and behaviours of the interviewees. Respondents were perhaps

choosing to deny their own freedom to change the situation, because with it came personal responsibility, discomfort, uncertainty and risk. Whilst maintaining a strong sense of self-esteem, interviewees appeared to have lost a sense of self. They appeared to believe that they are not to blame for the way things are (although there was some acknowledgement that they are now not helping matters – but the SWYMMMD game was used here); but they did not appear to understand who they were, or how they should conduct themselves in relation to the wider context. People talked of feeling confused, desperate, unclear about what was expected of them, unsure about what to do in order to ‘do the right thing’ etc. This confusion about their part in the whole is likely to have militated against personal action to create change. (*‘How can I go forward when I don’t know which way I’m facing?’*).

I suggest that choices were being exercised within this organisation – people were choosing not to create change – even though they had identified the need for it. This is because they did not want more experience of change; because they believed they could not personally impact on the system and they were unclear about their own part in or contribution to the whole. These choices were based on the desire to avoid more uncertainty, rather than the desire to keep things as they were.

There appears to be a lack of belief in their own personal power or strength – a belief that somehow they were too ‘weak’ to impact on the system? The choice seems to be not to try and move things because they were not strong enough.

I have re-visited the notion of addiction and have found parallel perspectives in many other areas of literature – writers on organisations, philosophers and psychologists all provide alternatives. Whilst being impressed with the similarity of the models of addiction, addictive thinking and addictive systems to a wide range of perspectives on human psychology and organisational psychology and behaviour, I could not, with confidence, go so far as to say that this council was

operating as an addictive system. Schaefer and Fassels' application of the model to organisational life is intriguing, and has provided me with a strong reference point against which to further analyse my data – but the data do not provide conclusive evidence of an addictive system. My conclusion is, therefore, that the beliefs and behaviours that pervaded this organisation were not addictions – they were habits. These beliefs and behaviours developed during a time of organisational change and uncertainty, and they were initially a response to feelings of loss and vulnerability (as represented in figure 5 – the transition grid). These beliefs and behaviours, having helped these people to cope with and survive change, had become habitual.

Goleman's work on lies v truths in organisations has helped me here – respondents have engaged in collective denial of one simple truth – and that truth is that they *could* change the situation if they knew how, regardless of the lack of clarity about their part in the whole. The dominant view expressed was that they were powerless to change things. This view was shared, discussed and reinforced. This way of seeing things had become a habit, and the positive (or more comfortable) feelings connected with holding this view had created a situation where the view was repeated and the behaviours which reinforced this 'truth' became habitual – e.g. low levels of engagement in organisational life, the focus on physiological needs rather than self-fulfilment, and the propensity for group think. A complex web of rationalisations existed within the organisation, which sustained these beliefs and consequent behaviours.

#### **7.4 Question 5 - Are we choosing to see things in a particular way because it makes it unnecessary for us to actually think?**

##### **7.4.1 Dilts and levels of subjective experience**

A model within neurolinguistics developed by Dilts (1980), influenced by the work of Bateson (1972) describes a hierarchy of levels for subjective experience



and suggests that each level should be attended to, to ensure that they are working effectively together. He asserts that if this is the case then human endeavour has the potential to be excellent. Figure 6 represents Dilts' levels, and reminds us that our sense of personal direction will affect our sense of identity and our beliefs and values. This will impact on our capabilities, our behaviours and on the environment.

**Figure 7**

**Levels of Subjective Experience**

<p><b>6. SPIRITUALITY</b> Your life purpose/sense of direction shapes your.....</p>
<p><b>5. IDENTITY</b> Your sense of identity shapes your....</p>
<p><b>4. BELIEFS AND VALUES</b> What is important to you and what you believe in influences your...</p>
<p><b>3. CAPABILITIES</b> Your knowledge and skills direct your ....</p>
<p><b>2. BEHAVIOUR</b> What you say and do determines your results in the.....</p>
<p><b>1. ENVIRONMENT</b> In which you choose to operate</p>

Dilts (1980) – from the work of Gregory Bateson

Environment

The basic level is the environment. Shared circumstances building rapport and creating a feeling of basic security and providing the possibility for excellence – but that is all. In the case of this organisation, the data suggest that good relationships existed – although respondents appear to have contradicted themselves, describing the organisation as ‘dishonest’ ‘two-faced’ etc., whilst at the same time saying that the people are ‘wonderful’, ‘talented’ etc. The

respondents spoke well of their immediate colleagues within the council, and appeared to feel good about themselves as part of this group of workers:

- *'The people I trust – the 5%'*
- *'Fun, jokes, laughter with the team'*
- *'Working with my team.....I draw energy from my staff..'*
- *'The people...'*
- *'The people I work with – it's packed full of wonderful, talented, intelligent people. Working with them has been a joy.'*
- *'I have a great team. I get through with them....'*

One respondent asked the following question, which strikes a chord in terms of the contradictory messages emerging from the data:

*'We say the organisation is terrible but the people are really nice! It doesn't make sense. Is it because people agree with each other that the organisation is terrible?'*

So at the same time as agreeing with one another that things were bad, the shared view seems to have been that the people were nice. The respondents may well have had a point – the prevalence of 'group think', defined by Janis (1972) as a lack of ability to test reality and to make appropriate judgements based on peer or group pressure, is a possible factor in ensuring that things are seen the same way and that relationships do not deteriorate on the surface. So rapport was good, but rapport has been built on the maintenance of the status quo, and does not seem to have provided a starting point for changing or improving performance. Wolfe Morrison and Milliken (2000) in their article on 'Organizational Silence' talk of the creation of inaccurate perceptions as employees share and collectively interpret their experiences, as part of the sense-making process. They remind us of the development of exaggerated perceptions. They suggest that strong ties at particular levels in an organisation

will increase sense-making activities, and so will lead to often exaggerated and inaccurate perceptions of the way things are.

### Behaviour

Dilts' 5<sup>th</sup> level is the behavioural level. Our behaviours are designed to achieve a purpose – unwanted behaviours can prove difficult to change even when we may want to change them, but all our behaviours are purposeful. In the case of this organisation, we have already considered the possibility that many behaviours are about maintaining the status quo, and are now proving difficult to change, especially given the existence of 'group think', which serves to maintain relationships, thereby ensuring that lower order motivational needs are met, using Maslow's hierarchy.

- *'I sustain good relationships with champions/protectors'*
- *'Talk to a colleague. Moan....'*
- *'I draw energy from my team...'*
- *'Go to lunch with friends...'*
- *'I vent my spleen. It gets me into trouble. This is a Stepford Wives organisation...'*
- *'There are people I trust and respect and I will talk to them...'*
- *'We have rapport – some sort of understanding...'* (referring to team)
- *'I look to the Union. We need to stick together – collectively defend ourselves...'*

### Capability

This is about level of skill – the behaviours we have practiced for so long that they become habitual or consistent. The behaviours seen in others, as described by respondents, were the same behaviours that many admitted to practising. One could argue that there was a certain level of consistency in

terms of behaviours and attitudes across the organisation, and that these could be described as patterns or habits. A large number of quotes from the data have already been provided in this thesis which support this view. These habits have created, reinforced and sustained the organisational climate, rather than creating the conditions for good performance.

- *'I act it out on people'*
- *'I just get through. I disengage.'*
- *'It's like domestic violence – I just continue. I seek support and I don't challenge. I keep it the same.'*
- *'Talk to a colleague. Moan – which I know is non-constructive but I've reached the point where I don't know how to change anything.'*

### Beliefs and Values

Dilts describes this level as the level of what we believe to be true and what is important to us. These beliefs act as permissions and prohibitions. In the case of the council, respondents believed that they could not change things – this belief acted as a prohibition. They also believed that they were not necessarily at fault, but that it was likely they are reinforcing things via their own behaviours and attitudes. This belief gave them permission to act in they way that they did.

- *'I belong to just a small part of the organisation. Not the whole organisation...'*
- *'I'm part of the system, I know...'*
- *'I'm sure I'm contributing. If I were sensible I'd just do it differently...'*
- *'I'm not as open as I should have been....'*
- *'I'm not a challenging sort of person – I am part of it – on the cusp.'*

- *'I thought it was really wrong then I'd challenge – but a bit of apathy kicks in....I don't agree with the initiatives but I don't see that I'm in a position to challenge...'*
- *'I'd hate to admit it but you get sucked in – if you keep saying no you'd be punished. There are sanctions if we behave ethically..'*
- *'I can't challenge it...'*

### Identity

This level is about a sense of self based on core beliefs and values and based on a sense of direction. This appears to have been lacking for individuals in the organisation. The data suggest some confusion about personal identity in the workplace – respondents seemed unable to decide what they are/who they are in relation to the organisation and what is expected of them. Many struggled as they attempted to explain their part in the whole:

- *'Everything we do we are wondering is this right? Should I have been doing something else?'*
- *'..... out of nowhere I've discovered that I've been doing it wrong or it's not valued .....you have to claw your way back from mediocrity to despair'.*
- *'Lack of self respect – I feel like I shouldn't be in that post – like everyone else is better than me...'*
- *'I only hate the organisation when I think the organisation is allowing itself to hate me...'*
- *'I'm continually asking myself 'why am I doing this?'*
- *'I need a sense of personal achievement – recognition from elsewhere...'*
- *'I haven't given up – but to the detriment of myself...'*
- *'By my indifference I'm colluding but I can't see any solution until the organisation kicks itself into shape...'*

Sennett's (1998) work is a reminder that one of the possible consequences of change is the loss of personal identity, and this loss is evident in responses of the interviewees.

### Spirituality

***'How can I go forward when I don't know which way I'm facing?'*** (John Lennon)

The word spirituality is used in this thesis in a particular way. Zohar (2000) draws on the work of Viktor Frankl (1985) as she describes spirituality as being

*'in touch with some larger, deeper, richer whole that puts our present limited situation into a new perspective. It is to have a sense of 'something beyond', of 'something more' that confers added meaning and value on where we are now. That spiritual 'something more' may be a deeper social reality or social web of meaning.....'* (p. 18).

It is not my intention that the word 'spirituality' is used, in this context, to describe any kind of religious dimension – rather that it is used to denote a search, in all of us, for meaning. The search for reasons for living our lives as we do, and doing the work that we do – the desire to make a connection with others and to that which is more than our own identities – the greater good, humankind etc. (The bricklayer who, when asked what he is doing, does not say 'I am laying bricks', he says 'I am building a house').

A number of writers have identified the need for a cause, or a sense of purpose, in our working lives. Neck and Milliman (1994) assert that a sense of community will motivate long-term creativity – not just success measured by wealth, and the word 'spiritual' has been used as a way of describing this search for meaning. Holbeche and Springett's (2004) study of the search for meaning at work sets

the context within which the word is used. Spirituality, in this thesis, is about the desire to place our lives and what we do in the wider context.

There was minimal reference to the wider context in the part of respondents, except to express a frustration that the wider context is ignored by 'them' – that wider context being the service users. Very few respondents (8) talked about service delivery and service users – the comments made were about the standard of service provided by the council or suggestions as to how to involve service users:

- *'set up a series of consultations with staff and with the community. I see my job as ensuring that the community it served by the staff. Bring the two together...'*
- *'We are \*\*\*\* at delivering....'*
- *'We should focus on services rather than the organisation...'*

This lack of focus on service delivery by respondents is indicative of an inward focus (as described in the peer review), and suggests a lack of ability among interviewees to see their place in or connection with the context of service delivery. They seem to have lost the meaning behind what they are doing, which is significant, given the reasons for the existence of public services and the potential impact of these services on peoples' lives. This lack of meaning, absence of spirituality, is likely to manifest itself in performance and behaviours as identified in the peer review, specifically focus on process and not outcomes; poor service delivery, time wasted on detail, procedures rather than action, minimal engagement with stakeholders etc.

NLP perspectives regarding the importance of purpose and identity in shaping beliefs and the impact of these beliefs on behaviours; attribution theory (Martinko, 1995) and expectancy-based models of motivation (Vroom, 1964,

Porter, L & Lawler E.E., 1968), as explored above in the analysis of this data all lead to the distillation of the following key characteristics from the data

- **Respondents were unable to make sense of the wider context, and the impact of their actions on the environment**
- **Respondents believed that the causes of the problems they were experiencing lay outside of their control**
- **Given the above, respondents had limited belief in their ability to effect any positive change**
- **Respondents were taking decisions about their actions based on these beliefs.**

If these key characteristics were found in an individual they would suggest a sense of helplessness. This has led me to consider the applicability of the learned helplessness phenomenon to this organisation. If people believe that they cannot control or change events and so behave accordingly, does this make them genuinely helpless, or can this be changed?

#### **7.4.2 Learned Helplessness – what’s it all about?**

*‘When experience with uncontrollable events leads to the expectation that future events may elude control, disruptions in motivation, emotion and learning may occur. This phenomenon has been called learned helplessness’.* Peterson, Maier and Seligman, 1993, preface

The phenomenon of learned helplessness was first discovered in the mid-1960s during experiments by Maier, Overmier and Seligman (Psychology students at the University of Pennsylvania), designed to test the two process theory of learning (classical conditioning and instrumental reinforcement). These experiments were unsuccessful in that predicted responses were not forthcoming. Dogs strapped into hammocks and given approximately 60



inescapable shocks became passive when, 24 hours later, they were placed in shuttle boxes from which it was possible to escape the shocks. The expectation had been that the responses of these dogs would be to avoid the shocks by reacting to various stimuli. After a period of activity the dogs lay down and made no further attempt to escape the shock. It appeared that, although occasionally being prepared to attempt avoidance of the shocks, the dogs were passively accepting them. This response was not the same as the response of other dogs who had been given shocks from which they could escape, or no shocks at all. These dogs seemed to be able to attribute their escape to their own actions, and soon learned how to avoid shocks in the future. This suggested that the perceived inability to control the shock in the dogs who had been unable to escape had reduced their motivation to act. The traditional stimulus/response approach did not appear to Maier, Overmier and Seligman to adequately address the dogs' apparent inability to learn the relationship between actions and outcomes, and the cognitive processes which had led to their behavioural deficits.

Maier, Overmier and Seligman collaborated to unravel the puzzle of the 'helpless' dog who appeared not to learn from his experience of the relationship between acting to avoid the shock and the termination of the shock, and as a result of this work the theory of learned helplessness was developed.

The theory comprises three components:

- environmental conditions – i.e. the conditions within which the animals found themselves
- the translation of these conditions into expectations
- the psychological processes which develop as a result of these expectations

Maier et al suggested that it was the animal's expectation that was the critical cognitive event, and which was responsible for the subsequent behaviours (or lack of them). The notion of expectation highlighted factors such as beliefs, knowledge, existing expectations and causal attributions. They identified psychological processes which would develop as a result of the belief or expectation that a negative event is unavoidable, namely:

- A decrease in incentive motivation – learning that response and outcome is not necessarily connected and expecting that to be the case in the future may well cause the animal to stop trying
- Cognitive deficit – the inability to learn when exposed to the relationships between behaviours and outcomes, as a result of having been exposed to uncontrollable events
- Inability to make associations – as a result of random events, and random relationships between actions and outcomes, a lack of ability to make associations and connections
- Emotional change – possible depression and anxiety developing as a result of the experience of uncontrollability.

Learned helplessness was later observed in humans. Hiroto (1974) exposed groups of students to loud and uncontrollable noises, terminated independently of their responses, or loud and controllable noises which could be turned off by pressing a button. Another group was not exposed to any noise. All subjects were then tested in a situation where they could exercise control over the noise, and, like the dogs, the result was that the group who had been subjected to uncontrollable noise failed to take control of their situation and terminate noises during the second test. The other two groups learned to terminate the noise quickly.

Hiroto and Seligman (1975) called attention to the most important part of helplessness and that was the degree to which helplessness was 'learned'.

Whilst there was little doubt that when a person was subjected to uncontrollable events he or she became passive, it could be argued that this was connected to patterns rather than learned behaviours. For example, if particular stimuli became associated with a lack of contingent reward or outcome, then the choice could quite reasonably be taken not to act. This is not the same as learned helplessness, where it takes the form of an internal 'state' - a characteristic, rather than a choice not to act because there are no rewards. It is more about self-beliefs than logic – an internal state of some generality which can apply across circumstances.

Hiroto and Seligman undertook research using both uncontrollable instrumental tasks (which were, of course, unpleasant in their consequences and required behavioural responses) and cognitive tests (which were challenging and difficult), to see whether those subjects experiencing uncontrollability would show a decrease in their ability to undertake the cognitive test, or those experiencing a struggle with the cognitive test would find difficulty with the instrumental task requiring certain behavioural responses. The results were illuminating, in that uncontrollability and failures to solve problems produced problems for all the subjects, regardless of the test. Hiroto and Seligman concluded that 'cross-modal' helplessness had been produced, i.e. the inability to take control in one scenario can induce learned helplessness which can then exist in another.

However, whilst Hiroto and Seligman state that induced helplessness is trait like as a result of this experiment, they acknowledge that the state of helplessness must have limits across time and across situations.

This would suggest that an individual, removed from a situation of uncontrollability for a period of time, would cease to experience feelings of helplessness and may act differently if then put back into the situation – seeking to resolve problems and act on challenges.

## The emotional consequences of learned helplessness

Brier et al (1987) report that the emotions attached to uncontrollability range from anxiety and anger, and can then move to depression. Peterson, Maier and Seligman (1993) assert that these feelings are active emotions in their own right and are not 'deficits'. Far from creating a state of stupidity, helplessness induces states of unease and mental discomfort.

These emotional consequences and their relationship to the psychological effects of change are clear – the transition grid (figure 2) based on the work of a range of writers on organisational change, highlights the same range of emotions. Change at the scale and pace experienced within this organisation would very probably have produced feelings of uncontrollability – and helplessness. But we do not see 'stupidity' emerging from the data – high levels of unease, discomfort and confusion, but not 'stupidity'. The imaginative use of metaphor, the interest in the analytical process and the skilled and creative ways of communicating indicate a group of intelligent and articulate people. This intelligence has been employed in the pursuit of coping strategies and this will be explored later in this chapter.

### **7.4.3 The attributional reformulation of the learned helplessness model – 'universal' helplessness**

Heider's (1958) work on the explanation of causal events (attribution theory) as discussed earlier in this thesis, is that people make sense of their world by identifying causes – and whether these causes are internal (i.e. the responsibility of the self) or external (i.e. caused by someone or something else). Heider's ideas have influenced many social psychologists (e.g. Martinko, 1995) to consider further the processes by which people explain their successes and failures.

Attribution theory combined with Rotter's (1966) theories on 'locus of control' (i.e. is the situation within my control or does the control lie somewhere else) have informed the development of the 'universal' helplessness model.

Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale (1978) produced a critique and reformulation of the learned helplessness model, based on the work of Heider and Rotter amongst others, suggesting that helpless people make causal explanations for the uncontrollable events they encounter. These causal explanations will impact on levels of self-esteem and on behavioural deficits.

When we encounter important events which are outside of our control we ask 'why'? The response to this question will affect the way we feel about ourselves and our choices about our behaviours. The 'universal helplessness' model, as distinct from the 'personal helplessness' model, allows for the circumstance where it is perceived by the individual concerned that anyone in their situation would be helpless. The causes of the individual's experience of helplessness lie outside of themselves, and the ability to control the situation is not with them, but sits somewhere else.

In the case of universal helplessness the person's self-esteem will remain intact. In the case of personal helplessness feelings of failure and self doubt will arise.

### The Coping-Performance Link

Mikulincer (1994), in his own study of human learned helplessness, discusses the connections between coping responses to helplessness and uncontrollability and the effects on performance. He identifies coping strategies as '*effortful cognitive and behavioural manoeuvres that support or interfere with task relevant activities*' (p. 49) and suggest that they can either improve or impair performance. Coping mechanisms which relate to performance demands will, of course, facilitate good levels of performance. However, those mechanisms

employed which are incongruent with task demands will impair performance. His views on the allocation of resources to coping responses are useful in the context of this research. He suggests that effort, time and energy used in problem solving and reappraising personal strategies are useful. However, energy spent avoiding issues and reorganising our situation in order to cope will have a negative effect on our capacity to perform.

Mikulincer suggests that the term '*lack of coping*' is meaningless in the context of the learned helplessness model, and that people exposed to failure will always do something about it. Coping strategies, even if they are strategies of avoidance and reorganisation of the situation should not be confused with passivity and lack of coping, in Mikulincer's view. However, the consequence of these avoidance/reorganisation strategies may well be that actions taken on ones own volition are few and far between; a 'frozen' state (Kurt Lewin (1947)).

#### **7.4.4 Universal helplessness and its applicability to the data**

Martinko and Gardner (1982) argue that learned helplessness can explain maladaptive behaviours of people in organisations – the examples they give are passivity, dissatisfaction, absenteeism, low productivity etc. These characteristics are similar to employee responses to the violation of the psychological contract, discussed earlier. It could be argued, then, that there is a direct relationship between the violation of the psychological contract and the onset of learned helplessness, and this will be explored later in this thesis. Perceptions of uncontrollability are likely when organisations are centralised bureaucracies with formal rules, (Aiken and Hague, 1966) where workers often regard salaries and benefits as unrelated to performance. (Lawler, 1966).

### The person culture and the learned helplessness model

We have already explored definitions of culture, and have drawn on Handy's definitions of role v person culture. My conclusion, as a result of a detailed examination of the data, is that this was an organisation displaying self-centred (protective) behaviours, fitting with Handy's definition of a 'person' culture.

These behaviours seem to have been negatively affecting performance and effectiveness, as highlighted in the peer review report, in line with Mikulincer's hypothesis. However, I am not convinced that the existence of a centralised bureaucracy with formal rules is what induced these behaviours, because many respondents expressed their lack of clarity about what the 'rules' were – and have come up with their own views on the covert 'rules of the game' (*this is a stepford wives organisation*, *There's a cliquy ness here...*, *It's too incestuous – it's like a club...*, *To be 'in' – it's something similar to a class thing...*, *There's a club atmosphere, and hierarchical distinctions. A feel for who's in and who's out...*).

The high levels of confusion and feelings of uncontrollability appear to be connected to change, and the lack of an obvious relationship between actions and outcomes, as highlighted in the data, and the data suggest a strong link with the learned helplessness model, *but* in its reformulated version, i.e. universal helplessness.

### Motivation and the learned helplessness model

We have explored the expectancy theory of motivation applied by psychologists such as Vroom (1964) which states that the motivation to engage in a given behaviour is determined by expectations or beliefs about what outcomes are likely to result from behaviours, and whether or not these outcomes will satisfy

their needs; and we have made connections to the psychological contract, as discussed by Schein (1988) and others – i.e. the implicit expectations which exist for individuals at work. We know from the data that expectations were low with regard to outcomes, and their relationship to behaviours, and respondents have articulated their feelings of helplessness and despair throughout the interviews. This seems to reflect the basis of the learned helplessness model, which is the perceived lack of relationship between actions and outcomes, and the subsequent internal and general state of helplessness which is induced in individuals. However, to stop here would not explain why *all* the respondents were displaying the characteristics of learned helplessness. New and temporary members of the organisations, who had not had personal experiences of helplessness, appeared to understand that the organisation was 'helpless'. This leads to further consideration of the applicability of vicariousness to the data.

#### 'Vicarious' helplessness and 'group' helplessness

Peterson, Maier and Seligman (1993) suggest that in the case of 'vicarious' helplessness, or 'modelled helplessness' (as defined by Bandura, 1986) an individual need not directly have experienced uncontrollable events in order to become helpless – it may be sufficient to see the effects of these events on others to induce a state of helplessness. Helplessness at group level (Simkin, Lederer and Seligman, 1983) has similar implications as vicarious helplessness. It suggests that groups may be rendered helpless by asking them to work at unsolvable problems. On later tasks they then act in a helpless fashion. This does not mean, however, that each member of that group is helpless as an individual – rather that the group takes on the helpless 'state'. It also does not imply that individual helplessness will necessarily create group helplessness. The emergence of the helpless state in a group is as a result, Simkin, Lederer and Seligman (1983) assert, of a group experience of uncontrollability. These



two models are compatible with the data in this study, and will be re-visited later in this chapter.

### 'Group think' and vicarious and group helplessness

The existence of 'group think' is an important factor when considering both vicarious and group helplessness in the context of the data. This seeming lack of ability to test reality and to make appropriate judgements has been reinforced through personal interaction within the council. Colleagues met and discussed their dilemma, and agreed that they could not change the situation – it was out of their hands. These perceptions may have been distorted through conversation, leading to exaggerated and inaccurate perceptions of how things were.

Helplessness at group level (Simkin, Lederer and Seligman, 1983) suggests that groups may be rendered helpless by asking them to work at unsolvable problems. The unsolvable problems here would appear to be the lack of understanding about what good performance would look like within the organisation; the fact that respondents were unclear about the 'rules of the game'; a belief that there were other organisational priorities in existence which were not shared, and a consequent lack of understanding about what kinds of behaviours were appropriate/acceptable within the organisation. These problems seem to have been created in the minds of respondents as a result of the uncertainty and levels of insecurity created by repeated uncontrollable events.

There is also evidence from new members of staff to suggest that they were witnessing the effects of past events on others and these effects were inducing a state of helplessness in them. Many respondents alluded to '*slipping into the council culture*', or talked of becoming part of the problem even though they did not want to be (*'just because everyone's miserable around me I don't want to be*

it ...'). This would suggest that people were learning to be helpless within the council, though not always through direct personal experience, but through observation, conversation and group activity. This is a different kind of 'socialization' than that described by writers such as Schein (1988), who talks of recruitment and induction as the traditional organisational 'socialization' processes. The data provide evidence that employees are being 'socialized' into helplessness. This is *vicarious* learned helplessness. A different kind of induction process!

The observations, conversations and activities where helplessness is experienced at group level will result in individuals concluding that the problem sits outside of their own locus of control, and that the problem is a 'collective' problem. The data show that this is the case. All respondents believed that the cause of the problem lay elsewhere – that someone else was to blame. Respondents also talked of their own potential and talent, and their desire for things to be different, but none felt they were able to influence change. This leads me to further consider the reformulated model of learned helplessness – *universal* helplessness.

### Combining attribution theory with the concepts of locus of control and universal helplessness

As discussed earlier, attribution theory is based on the need for human beings to make sense of their experiences by finding causal explanations. These causal explanations will affect the way we feel about ourselves and the choices we make about our actions and behaviours. If it's our fault that things have gone wrong then we feel bad about ourselves. If we believe it's not our fault, things would be the same for anyone in our situation, then our self-esteem remains intact. If the solution is outside of our locus of control, then our self-esteem remains intact – if the solution is within our control, then our self-esteem is negatively affected.

The data clearly show that the dominant view was that the problem was not the fault of the individuals concerned, and that they were powerless to make the necessary changes –i.e. outside of their control. This view has been arrived at via conversation, observation and group experiences of helplessness.

The data also show a great deal of self-belief existing within the organisation – people genuinely believing that they were only behaving in the way they did because they had to – not because they were bad people. All sorts of explanations were provided as to why people had adopted negative behaviours – most put them down to survival, or to having been ‘taught’ to behave in this way:

- *‘I’m feeling abused – but I’m not abusing anyone – but then I am – I must be! The abuse goes right down to the customers...’*
- *‘I’m part of the problem, but not out of choice. Probably everyone you interview will say that. Even the top managers, maybe. Who is accountable?’*
- *‘I do it to the people I manage – I look for confirmation of my understanding....to confirm the nonsense...’*

There appears to be little doubt existing for respondents about their skills and potential – but the belief that there was little point in applying these skills, or performing to their full potential – because the experience would not be rewarding – nothing, they asserted, would change as a result of taking action, and there would be no other reward attached to acting. This would appear to combine theories of self-efficacy with attribution theory (the identification of causal explanations for events) and expectancy theory, which states that the motivation to engage in a given behaviour is determined by expectations or beliefs about what outcomes are likely to result from behaviours.

## Combining the concepts of 'self-efficacy', 'expectation' and 'universal helplessness'

Self-efficacy represents one's belief about one's ability to perform a task (Bandura, 1977, 1982). The theory states that people possessing low self efficacy will have difficulty dealing with their environment and the demands that it places on them. Bandura suggests that self-efficacy theory can be extended to groups (the impact of group think on perceptions of self efficacy), drawing on the work of Gist (1987), who states that group-think can contribute to unrealistically high group efficacy perceptions.

Herriot (2001) reminds us that our self-esteem is a result of our view of ourselves; our potential to effect change or improvement and our belief in our ability to succeed in particular situations. Martinko (1995) explores the relationship between attribution and expectancy and suggests that those people who attribute failure to external causes, and so have higher expectations of their own success in any given situation, will also have high self-efficacy (will believe in their own ability to perform well in other circumstances). This belief will positively impact on self-esteem.

Respondents in this research appear to have good self-esteem; no respondents identified themselves as the cause of the problem and no respondents expressed the view that they expected this to be the case for them wherever they worked because of something about *them*. The existence of 'group-think' and collective sense-making may have supported these beliefs.

### Combining 'empowerment' and 'universal helplessness'

The existence of high self-efficacy, as well as the attribution for 'failure' to external, unstable circumstances, and the expectation that actions taken to change the situation would not be rewarded (or even acknowledged) and so not rewarding, indicates that respondents, whilst believing in their own potential to make a positive contribution, regarded themselves as disempowered. Herriot (2001) describes the term 'empowerment' as rhetorical – the term implies the giving of power by managers to employees. If this implied promise of participation and involvement is broken then employees become cynical. This cynicism will be shared within networks and groups. The data suggest that participants believed themselves to be disempowered – not part of the decision making processes, not able to influence the situation, and that respondents discussed their perceptions with allies, team members and 'protectors'.

### Coping mechanisms and the reinforcement of universal helplessness

*'Effortful cognitive and behavioural manoeuvres that support or interfere with task relevant activities'* (Mikulincer, 1994, p. 49) existed within the organisation – a great deal of energy appears to have been given to 'surviving' the circumstances – behaviours ranging from looking at job advertisements, avoiding work and meetings, complaining to colleagues, doing the filing, having fun with team members etc. These 'coping strategies' were negatively affecting performance within the council, and this has been borne out by the results of the peer review. The responses, and the fact that interviewees were so keen to participate as well as to offer further help to the research process, do not indicate passivity and the inability to cope. Participants had much to say about how they got through their working days, how they worked round systems and processes and how they avoided work they felt was unnecessary or

inappropriate. Interestingly, many respondents commented on how 'busy' everyone seemed to be, and the fact that they could not understand what the 'busy-ness' was achieving:

- *'Busy-ness. We are all busy. Why?'*
- *'\*\*\*\*\*' knows what the people in the middle and at the top are doing- but they appear to be very busy!'*

It would seem reasonable to assume that the 'busy-ness' in the organisation was about coping or survival strategies – reorganisation of work, avoidance of work, the maintenance of beliefs through interaction and the focus on hygiene factors in the workplace. It appears that it had little to do with task relevant activity.

The consequence of these avoidance/reorganisation strategies, manifesting themselves in 'busy-ness' would appear to have helped keep the organisation in a 'frozen' state.

Re-examination of the data in relation to the reformulated (universal) model of learned helplessness, suggests that this model provides some further explanation for the prevailing attitudes and behaviours within the organisation. The organisation, then, has learned to be helpless via conversation, observation and experience. The universality of this helplessness, i.e. it is a condition which applies to all employees, ensures that levels of self-esteem remain intact.

#### **7.4.5 Other perspectives on Learned Helplessness and Universal Helplessness**

Both the learned helplessness model and the universal helplessness model have been given some attention by writers on organisational cultures and

dynamics, and the model appears to be regarded as a plausible explanation of patterns of behaviour as a result of a range of organisational factors.

### Organisational decline and learned helplessness as a result of an accumulation of factors

Kanter (2003) in her recent Harvard Business Review Article, writes of organisational decline stemming from an accumulation of decisions and actions which then create a set of organisational dynamics which serve to 'seal' the situation. Once caught in the spiral of decline, Kanter asserts that it can seem impossible to change the situation. The organisational system gains momentum, and to change what are 'frozen' behaviours can prove to be a daunting challenge. Taffinder (1998) also talks of the 'spiral of decline' in his study of learned helplessness, suggesting that when such helplessness permeates an organisation and reaches a level of critical mass, the culture may become dominantly one of learned helplessness. He likens the process of leading people out of this spiral of decline to 'raising the dead'.

### Organisational politics and learned helplessness

Prasad and Rubenstein (2003) examine the effect on individuals of organisational politics and suggest that this can be best understood using the learned helplessness framework, drawing on the work of Martinko and Gardner (1982), and others. Martinko and Gardner assert that *Organisationally Induced Helplessness*, with its emphasis on cognition and attribution, provides an explanation for the negative behaviours in organisations that appear to be related to the perception of a lack of control. They suggest that the states that typify organisationally induced learned helplessness include depression, anxiety, stress, frustration, hostility, resignation, apathy and anger. Prasad and Rubenstein apply this theoretical perspective to their work on the impact of organisational politics on individuals.

Prasad and Rubenstein (2003) talk of organisational politics comprising negotiation, bargaining and compromise – a process of coalition building and influence outside of an individual's traditional power base. They draw on the work of Madison et al (1980) and assert that the harmful effects of organisational politics could include distraction from organisational/group goals, divisiveness, fights, tension, frustration, incompetence and resulting damage to the organisation's reputation and image. Prasad and Rubenstein suggest that the consequences of organisational politics depend on the basis for political action – the advancement of self-interest or the instrument by which change to systems are made. While the two perspectives are related, the first could result in individuals feeling that they have been tricked or treated unfairly (Roth, 1980, p115).

The examination of organisational politics and their impact is pertinent in the context of this study – this is a local authority which is operating in a highly politicised environment. Joyce (2000) reminds us that the main sources of change in the public sector are the politicians, and that top managers occupy a mediating role between the politicians and the employees. Joyce suggests that although it may appear that top managers are instigating change, they are actually occupying a brokerage role. Joyce asserts that it is therefore important that workers are helped to understand the political dimensions so that they can make sense of change. This is an important point; the data appear to show a prevailing lack of understanding of why things have been done in the way that they have, what the organisation stands for, and what its current priorities are. Whilst the organisation is overtly run by politicians, and there are political decisions driving the work of the council, the application of political behaviours and the political manoeuvring (i.e. negotiation, bargaining, compromise, coalition-building and influence) during local government reorganisation and subsequent restructuring processes seem to have induced feelings of frustration, anger, despair etc. The prevalence of politics and the fact that the actions of the organisation are, in theory, driven by local and national politicians,



may well have been providing respondents at all levels with more supporting evidence to sustain their belief that change sat outside their locus of control.

### Learned helplessness, levels of control and the management of change

Hayes (1991), provides the more detailed account of the application of the learned helplessness framework to one organisation (Plutex), and highlights the need to change expectations from uncontrollability to controllability. Hayes informed me that at the time of his writing the learned helplessness model had not been applied at organisational/whole systems level – only at individual level. Hayes believes that the model provided an explanation about what was going on in Plutex, and he continues to allude to the model in current work. His (2002) work on change management refers to the model, drawing on the work of May (1969) on powerlessness as an excuse for doing nothing:

*The lack of will is much more than merely an ethical problem: the modern individual so often has the conviction that even if he did exert his 'will' – or whatever illusion passes for it – his actions wouldn't do any good anyway'. May (1969), In Hayes (2002), p. 20*

Hayes refers to Rotter's work on locus of control and relates this to the theory of learned helplessness. He applies the model to the management of change, asserting that managers will begin to question their own ability to manage change effectively if, when confronted with a new problem or opportunity, old and well-tried ways of managing fail to deliver outcomes. This may result in motivational and cognitive deficits, as per Seligman's model.

As we have seen from the data, the pace and scale of change has been highlighted by respondents as one of the main causes the current negative organisational climate. The way this change was managed may not have been ideal – the sequence of events described in chapter one of this thesis would

suggest that things could have been done differently and better. This might be a contributing factor – that patterns have been repeated as a result of motivational and cognitive deficits on the part of managers. Indeed, there does appear to have been a failure to learn from past mistakes in the council, as identified by Bailey (2001):

*Even though we are a new organisation we still cling to many of the bureaucratic processes and procedures of our predecessor organisations and local government history..... Our change capacity is poor and in the past some change activities have been ill conceived 'knee jerk' reactions seeking quick fixes to wrongly diagnosed problems'. (p.4)*

There appears to be something of the Homer Simpson about the organisation in its approach to change – each time a change has 'failed' – either because of organisational behaviours or politics, or because of wrong diagnoses, another change of one sort or another appears to have been implemented. This may be termed as the 'D'oh!' approach to learning. So this repeated pattern of introducing more change after failed change would appear to be reinforcing the problem. This accords with the notion of the onset of cognitive deficit which develops as a result of the inability to connect actions to outcomes. When you're in a hole, try digging harder.....

#### **7.4.6 Summary of response to question 5**

My question was '**are we choosing to see things in a particular way because it makes it unnecessary for us to actually think?** Dilts' model provides us with a reference point against which to draw certain conclusions. Most respondents talked of good relationships with friends and colleagues within the organisation, and some overtly celebrated the quality of the people in the council. These strong relationships and the interactions that take place served to sustain certain beliefs. These beliefs seemed to be that the situation was bad,

but that it was neither the fault of the respondents, nor was it within their control to change. The existence of limiting beliefs – beliefs which close down choice (as described by O'Connor and McDermott, 1996, in relation to NLP principles) is evidenced within the data – the overwhelming view that the respondents couldn't influence things, couldn't change things - accords with the theory of universal helplessness, and with vicarious helplessness as new members of staff learn ways of thinking, behaving and being, and adopt the dominant beliefs (as evidenced in the quotes from the data, provided earlier).

The investment of time in sustaining relationships within the organisation ensured a level of collusion and acted as a coping strategy. It sustained the commonly held belief that the situation was the fault of someone else, thereby providing useful permissions and prohibitions, which supported patterns of behaviour. The prevalence of 'group think' ensured that things were seen the same way and that relationships did not deteriorate on the surface. In short, it made it unnecessary for individuals to think for themselves, independently of others, about the situation and their part in it. High levels of deletion, distortion and generalisation seemed to exist within the organisation - the 'gatekeepers at the doors of perception', as described earlier in this thesis. These coping strategies appear to have become habits, and by sustaining an inward focus – avoiding engaging with the wider context and with the real reasons for the existence of the council (i.e. service delivery), respondents were unlikely to have their thoughts, beliefs or levels of self-esteem challenged. All of this militated against real change – the very thing that respondents appeared to yearn for, and affected standards of performance (as already described in this thesis). This is the *vicarious* nature of this organisation's state of helplessness.

Despite the use of coping strategies which were designed to ensure avoidance and to reinforce beliefs about causes and loci of control, a great deal of anxiety and frustration existed. Respondents seemed to have lost a sense of purpose or direction (a result of their disengagement with the wider context) and this was

having a direct impact on their 'sense of self'. Although confident in their own abilities/virtues and strengths, they were confused about how they fitted into the grand scheme of things. This accords with Sennett's work on character corrosion as a result of change, but is now, to a great extent, self-induced – lack of understanding, the sense of helplessness and the belief that the fault lies with someone or something else, is either a chosen belief, or a belief which has become a habit – a self-fulfilling prophecy. By sense-making, observation and sharing experiences of 'group helplessness', the belief is reinforced.

*'What if I had no hand in the original event? What if no-one can blame me for having contributed to it? Then, no doubt, I am a pure, innocent victim. And then let somebody come and try to question my sacrificial status or even suggest I do something about my misery. What was inflicted upon me by God, the world, fate, nature, chromosomes and hormones, society, parents, relatives, the police, teachers, doctors, bosses, and especially my friends is so grievous that the mere insinuation that I could perhaps do something about it adds insult to injury...'* Watzlawick (1983) p. 2.

It is possible that the majority of those interviewed did not 'have a hand' in the original event or events which have caused the current organisational climate to develop. It certainly appears from the data that respondents believed that the circumstances had been 'inflicted' on them in some way, and by someone or something. It is also clear from the data that respondents expected things to be another way, but didn't accept responsibility for changing the way things were. Indeed, when asked to provide more information about where the fault lay, some participants became confused, others found the fact that they could not provide an answer amusing (whilst at the same time appearing to be slightly embarrassed), and one particular respondent asked me if I could tell them at the end of my research.:

*'I haven't a clue..... I'd get you to do these interviews and then analyse them.....'*

There were occasions when respondents were slightly uncomfortable– one particular respondent stating that they felt 'challenged', but there was little resistance to exploring the question and also to exploring why they could not provide an answer – indeed the fact that they couldn't was often a source of entertainment/embarrassment/amusement. This is what made me wonder if things were really as serious as it appeared from the data. Watzlawick's title *'The Situation is Hopeless but Not Serious – the pursuit of unhappiness'* (1983) strikes chords at this point.

## **7.5 Conclusions – an overall response to questions 4 and 5**

Questions 4 and 5 have suggested that the situation reflected choice on the part of respondents – the choice to see things in a certain way to avoid having to think, and the choice to do nothing about it. On examination of the data I have concluded that this is less about choice than it is learned ways of behaving, and the inability to break out of patterns.

I suggest that the data show an organisation displaying the characteristics of universal helplessness, and this helplessness is quickly learned by new members of staff who enter the system (vicarious helplessness). This articulated belief that they are helpless but blameless sustains individuals – even allows them to engage in humour and self-questioning. There is a level of self-confidence existing among the respondents which has enabled them to be, up to a point, self-critical and self-deprecating in their responses. The data show that:

- **Respondents lacked clarity about their role in the wider context, and how they could contribute to this context.**

- Respondents believed that they could not change things; it was outside of their control. This suggests the existence of some kind of state of learned helplessness.
- Individuals observed that others were also unable to change things; they experienced helplessness at group level and they discussed the situation with their colleagues. They learned that the problem existed across the organisation. This is *vicarious* helplessness.
- Based on their observations, experiences and conversations, individuals did not feel it appropriate to blame themselves for the situation, believing it to be caused by external rather than internal factors. This suggests that the organisation was in a state of *universal* rather than learned helplessness
- The coping strategies employed include engaging in 'group think' and collective sense-making as ways of reinforcing this belief and supporting decisions and behaviours arising from this belief.
- Interviewees were locked into habitual ways of behaving, which maintained the status quo and which ensured that they 'fitted into' the organisation's ways of believing and acting. I do *not* believe that this is evidence of addictive behaviour, for all the reasons outlined earlier.

### Culture or climate?

The responses seem to suggest a lack of clarity about the culture of the organisation – i.e. 'the way things are done around here'. This lack of clarity, lack of understanding about cause and effect, feelings of confusion and uncertainty and experience of inconsistency is reminiscent of Argyris's (1990) study of defensive routines and self sealing behaviours in organisations. He talks of people operating in accordance with governing rules – which are to be in unilateral control, to win and not to lose and to suppress negative feelings.

Argyris asserts that organisational defensive routines are based on the following logic:

- craft messages that contain inconsistencies
- act as if the messages are not inconsistent
- make the ambiguity and inconsistency in the message undiscussable
- make the undiscussability of the undiscussable also undiscussable

(p.27)

Argyris asserts that the consequence of operating by these rules and logic is that people in organisations learn to live with their confusion by generating further explanations. These explanations contradict one another, and will produce actions or non-actions which serve to 'seal' the environment. Argyris gives a very good example – staff believe that the management team encourage open discussions, whilst also believing that they are not open to influence. They then explain this to themselves by concluding that the openness is a strategy by which the management team can cover up its resistance to influence. Having concluded that this is the case, workers will not test this. A climate of distance and mistrust develops, which will ensure that issues become even more undiscussable. They have created a 'self-sealing' environment.

The data is certainly confusing – respondents struggled to come up with examples to support their assertions and many used metaphor as a way of sense-making. It would appear that respondents were attempting to create some sense of control of their circumstances, by limiting the risks they were prepared to take; they were certainly now protecting themselves from further 'loss' by avoiding any further change, and it can be reasonably assumed that the use of 'group think' and other 'survival' mechanisms were helping them to suppress their negative feelings. Certainly participants have attempted to generate explanations for themselves for the way things are. Out of this

confusion has developed a sense of helplessness – of being unable to create change.

Argyris uses the word 'climate' as he describes defensive routines. His use of words such as inconsistency, ambiguity and undiscussability suggest a *lack* of shared assumptions – a *lack* of understanding about 'the way we do things around here'. His perspective has helped me to draw my conclusions about the applicability of the words culture and climate to this organisation. I do not believe that it is realistic to talk of a *culture* in the context of this case study. It is my view that what is driving the organisation is its *climate* – the 'mood' of the people, which has developed out of history and experience and which has created a set of beliefs and behaviours. The data has contained ambiguity because the organisation is ambiguous. This organisational ambiguity has created a climate of uncertainty, inconsistency and undiscussability, and feelings of helplessness.

I suggest that far from being malleable, this climate had become entrenched – respondents did not now choose to create change – their beliefs and behaviours had become habitual – 'self-sealing'.

## **7.6 Re-visiting NLP principles**

Throughout this thesis connections have been made back to the principles of NLP – we have looked at belief systems, deletion, distortion and generalisation, neurological levels and meta questioning. For each new theoretical perspective explored and applied to the organisation, from defining climate via the identification of shared meanings and mental models through to addictive thinking, I have been reminded of NLP theories and perspectives.

It was never my intention to re-visit the NLP model with such frequency as I have. The original reason for using the NLP meta-model was, as described



earlier, to ensure that I avoided collusion with the interviewees. Having completed the research the NLP models and perspectives appeared to have served their purpose. However, every theoretical perspective I have explored and applied to the data has led me to re-visit the NLP literature. The NLP study of human experience and communication and the subsequent development of NLP tools and techniques, whilst originally having been informed by the work of such writers, philosophers, linguists and therapists as Eric Berne, Paul Watzlawick, Carl Rogers, Gregory Bateson, Milton Erickson, Virginia Satir, Fritz Perls etc., now provides a model which captures a wide range of perspectives and applies them to human experience, beliefs and actions and to the use of language as a way of changing beliefs of an individual.

I do not intend to provide further detailed explanation of NLP perspectives and principles here. A number of writers have been critical of the model as a 'model for subjective experience', e.g. Salas et al, 1989; Yeager, 1985 and Graunke and Roberts, 1985. The NLP model is, in my view, an *eclectic* model – one which has been developed by drawing from many different schools. It has been described by Dilts as 'whatever works', which suggests that by studying the work of Erickson, Perls, Bateson, Satir etc, Bandler and Grinder developed strategies which reflected this broad study. The NLP model draws on the mode 1 knowledge of academics and the mode 2 knowledge of professional practitioners, or 'praxis' (the connecting of learning to 'real life' situations). For me, it has provided explicit tools and techniques for generating an understanding of thinking patterns, and some possible options for creating changes in these patterns, including the use of presuppositions.

I will however re-visit the broad definitions so that parallels with other theoretical perspectives are clear.

NLP is the study of human communication, and of how we create meaning from our experiences. One of the central principles of NLP is that people respond to

their experiences, and not necessarily to reality itself. Our beliefs about the way things are will develop as a result of our experiences of the world and the way we have interpreted those experiences. Those beliefs will subsequently affect what we think and how we act. They become the rules we live by. They are our best guesses at reality and they inform our view of how the world seems to work.

NLP states that we have beliefs about a range of things – other people, ourselves, our relationships, what is possible etc. Our beliefs give us confidence – they provide us with a sense of our identity. However, what we believe is not necessarily true – it is either useful or not useful for us. Beliefs can act as self-fulfilling prophecies – permissions or prohibitors. For example, a person may have had a negative experience of learning mathematics at school – perhaps the teacher was unskilled, or one part of the subject proved extremely difficult for the learner. This experience has led the person to believe that he/she is 'no good at maths'. This belief will then translate itself into certain actions, which merely reinforce the belief. For example, the person drops maths as soon as they are able to and so leaves school with no formal qualification. Throughout their life in any situation where mathematical calculations are necessary, by using the process of self-talk this person reminds themselves that they are no good at this and so avoids the work or passes it to someone else, claiming that they are unable to tackle maths. These actions are as a result of the belief, and these actions reinforce the belief.

NLP is about treating beliefs as principles of conduct. We act as if our beliefs are true, and we like the results, so we continue to act as if they are true. By believing that he/she is useless at maths, the person acts to avoid situations where maths is required. The results are positive – the person avoids putting themselves under pressure, leaving the mathematical calculations to others and feeling safe in the knowledge that if there is a mistake it is not theirs. So holding on to the negative belief is strangely rewarding.

NLP contends that there is no 'right' perspective in any situation, but that holding only one perspective can be limiting, and can provide an incomplete picture of the world. By the skilled application of language, the NLP meta-model offers a set of patterns and questions to clarify meaning, to gather information, to identify limits and to give choices. It is about broadening our perceptions of the world and of the opportunities open to us, by examining our beliefs and the effects that these beliefs are having on our lives.

### NLP and its relationship to other perspectives

As well as those writers who have directly influenced the development of the NLP models and perspectives, a range of studies of organisational life also reflect NLP principles and perspectives, and accord with philosophical, psychological, linguistic and therapeutic perspectives.

Egan, Argyris and Schein (among others) have explored the differences between the espoused culture and the 'shadow' culture of an organisation. Their central message is that beliefs, shared assumptions, values and norms will drive our behaviours in organisations. These perspectives directly relate to the notion of experiences shaping beliefs and beliefs driving behaviours. Morgan's 'psychic prison' metaphor, designed to illustrate the existence of basic assumptions and the danger of becoming trapped in particular ways of thinking and seeing the world, also links well with the NLP framework, as does the work of Kets de Vries and Miller, writing of the coming together of common perceptions and shared fantasies and the existence of self-sealing behaviours in organisations. Lewin talks of shared assumptions developed over time providing people with stability and meaning and then driving their behaviours.

I have used Dilts' NLP model of levels of subjective experience as a way of developing understanding of the beliefs and values within the organisation, and it would seem from the data that the prevailing belief (the shared assumption) was that people were powerless to change things, and that it was not their fault. This belief provided them with reasons for acting in certain ways and, more particularly, for *not* acting. The 'frozen' organisation – limited by its own beliefs.

Hiroto and Seligman's describe learned helplessness as an internal 'state' a characteristic, rather than a one-off informed choice not to act because of the lack of reward. This internal state is the state of learned helplessness – it is beyond *choice*, and about emotion. Again, there are striking similarities with the work on learned helplessness and the NLP framework, where resourceful and unresourceful states are explored. Good states for learning and change are identified as curiosity, interest, excitement etc., while negative states are identified as listlessness, anxiety, hostility and boredom. The writers on NLP remind us that states are contagious. A belief that one is helpless, then, is likely to produce feelings of listlessness, anxiety, anger etc.

Watzlawick's (1984) and others' work on constructivism (i.e. the argument that we are not passive recipients of an already existing world, but we are co-creators of it) has informed the writing on NLP. The map of reality made from experience, the responsibility for how we perceive things and how we then act on our perceptions, has been influenced by constructivism. Watzlawick's work has been referred to in this thesis – specifically his 'Pursuit of Unhappiness', where he challenges the reader to hold certain views and beliefs in order to sustain their feelings of hopelessness.

Eric Berne's work on transactional analysis has been alluded to in this work, as has his study of the games people play. Grinder and Bandler, in their development of the NLP framework and models, studied Eric Berne undertaking psychotherapy, via videotape. We have considered the SWYMMD model and

its applicability to the data – the belief that the actions taken by respondents are driven by something or someone else. Again, this perception is limiting the choices available to the respondents.

Goleman talks of the collective denial of truth, and the fact that our defences become habits. He describes our tendency to ‘fall back into the soothing arms’ of our familiar tactics. Block talks of the question ‘how’ being a defence against action. These views accord with the work done on NLP – the assertion that beliefs drive behaviours, and when these behaviours are rewarding, they reinforce our beliefs.

Much of the literature exploring addiction which talks, for example, of self-deception, organisational world views, frames of reference and the maintenance of the status quo also accord with the NLP model. Despite my belief that the addiction model is too generally applicable to everything to be usefully applicable to this organisation, it is worth noting the similarities between perspectives on addiction and NLP perspectives.

Because of these connections I propose to use the NLP model as an integrating framework to inform the development of some suggested ways to change the organisation – not because it replaces or is better than the range of theoretical perspectives I have presented throughout this thesis – rather because it seems to capture them all, and so may provide some ‘clues’ as to possible ways to change the psyche of this organisation.

# Chapter 8

## Pattern Interrupt

### Re-programming the organisation

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## Chapter 8

### Pattern Interrupt

#### Re-programming the organisation

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***'No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant Lord, one that will do  
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,  
Advise the Prince; no doubt, an easy tool,  
Deferential, glad to be of use,  
Politic, cautious and meticulous;  
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous –  
Almost, at times, the Fool.***

From 'The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock'  
T.S. Eliot

#### **8.1 Introduction – spiritual exhaustion and unresourcefulness**

Eliot's poem presents the irony of Prufrock's insights into his sterile life and his lack of will to change that life. The poem is full of images of paralysis and weakness (the description of the evening as 'etherized upon a table'). Prufrock understands that he lacks authenticity, and that he should shake himself out of his meaningless existence, but he knows that by doing this he risks disturbing his 'universe' – being rejected by those around him who are also living meaningless, sterile lives. The poem captures Prufrock's sense of defeat for

failing to act courageously, and is a moving study of spiritual exhaustion and a lack of emotional resources with which to create change

The people I interviewed have, in their own ways, expressed their sense of disappointment with themselves and with their seemingly meaningless existences within the workplace. Their failure to act to create change and their reluctance to disturb the status quo appears to be draining the energy and life from this organisation, and this has impacted in organisational performance. What is ironic is that these people, like Prufrock, have shared their insights and have been open to fact that they are unwilling to try and change the situation. Fear of isolation, rejection, failure and more uncertainty has kept them locked into fixed ways of thinking and behaving (the self-sealing environment, the slow death, the collective trance/inertia, the defence against change etc). Spiritual exhaustion leading to unresourcefulness.

#### The current situation

At this point it is probably worth sharing a little anecdotal but relevant information with the reader about the current (2005) state of the organisation (bearing in mind that the research was undertaken in 2001/2002).

Little appears to have improved during the past two years – indeed many people who still work in the organisation (who have remained in touch with me) express the view that the situation is at best the same if not worse. More change at the very top of the organisation has caused high levels of insecurity for people, and higher monetary rewards paid to certain individuals within the organisation (which were not made public) have reinforced feelings of disappointment for many employees.



I offer these fragments of evidence as further confirmation that the council at the centre of this study appears to be experiencing a continuation of these problems. It remains stuck.

## 8.2 Re-visiting the Psychological Contract

The psychological contract has been discussed earlier in this work, and I am mindful of the central role of this concept in making sense of the data. The unwritten expectations of staff within this organisation appear to have been repeatedly violated – expectations on the part of the organisation have conflicted with individual expectations. The hope that individuals would adhere to the goals which informed the re-organisation process, and those which influenced the decision to make further organisational changes were probably unrealistic. It should be noted that in the case of the re-organisation process, it was never the goal of the three organisations – it was a Government goal. This would no doubt have affected the level of commitment to achieving this goal, at all levels. Regarding the additional re-structuring processes, it is unlikely that individuals were ready to engage in this process with any commitment, given their recent experiences of local government reorganisation. Perhaps it was initiated more out of a sense of necessity than with any level of real commitment? Maybe this is why repeated attempts had to be made to get things right – because *nobody* really wanted to have to engage in any more change? Guest and Conway (2001) in their study of the effect of change on the psychological contract suggest that change would appear to be less of a threat to the psychological contract than bad management. This suggests that if change is well led and participative then the psychological contract would remain in good shape.

Trust, respect, autonomy, fairness, participation – these are all unwritten expectations on the part of employees, and it is fair to say that for *all* those who participated in the interviews these have not been met. This is the case at all levels, which suggests that the problem has not necessarily been created at a

particular place within the organisation (although certainly the data and anecdotal evidence suggest that individuals within the organisation have reinforced problems by their own actions). The issue of 'sides' (i.e. manager versus worker) is interesting here – it would seem from the data that both 'sides' feel disappointed, and both sides are talking about the same things – trust, respect, dignity, autonomy etc. Managers are not blaming employees, they are blaming other managers. Everyone seems to have experienced a lack of care, whether they are a senior manager or a front line service provider. Whilst accepting that the violation of the psychological contract due to poor management of change is a central part of the problem, I suggest that it is not as simple as it might seem. The data show that at all levels the same kinds of disappointment are expressed – senior managers have not discussed their disappointment that staff are not 'signed up' to the 'vision' of the organisation; they have expressed their feelings of despair, their experiences of invisibility, lack of care, loss of control. They have raised the same grievances as staff. The lack of clarity about cause and effect, the low levels of expectation and the limited loci of control seem to be experienced by everyone.

During the last decade there have significant levels of change within the local government sector – some which have directly contradicted others (this is further discussed later in this chapter). Could it be that those people at the very top of this organisation are feeling that they are not treated with respect, autonomy, dignity etc? That their psychological contract has been violated too?

The findings suggest that the violation of the psychological contract has been experienced at all levels and in all parts of the organisation in question. This provides us with an additional way in which we might understand how the whole organisation has become 'stuck' in sets of beliefs and behaviours – some of which are about passing on punishment, others of which are about withdrawal and protective behaviours. What the violation of the psychological contract does *not* explain, however, is the helplessness experienced by those employees who

are new to the organisation, or to local government, or who are employed on temporary contracts doing basic work, with no particular interest in or allegiance to the public sector. Why would *they* feel that their contract has been violated?

### The experiences that have led to the beliefs and the behaviours

The origin of these behaviours and beliefs is in the past – when the organisation went through large scale change. Individuals had to compete to hold onto their jobs, others took voluntary redundancy; others moved into the new authority but experienced a lack of leadership during the transition period. Those people responsible for setting the direction for the new organisation were in direct competition with one another for jobs in the new organisation, and so were understandably distracted from the core business of the council. Those people responsible to providing front line services were largely left to ‘get on with it’ while decisions about structures and post holders were made. Following this period of uncertainty, more re-structuring took place within a year of the ‘birth’ of the new authority, and subsequent small re-structuring processes and changes in staff have continued to create feelings of uncertainty and lack of clear direction for employees at all levels.

### The beliefs arising from the experiences

The unpredictability attached to the change; the lack of strong leadership, and the disappointment experienced by many people as they lost status, moved from individual offices into open plan office accommodation (which was over-crowded in some cases) and were no longer working with colleagues who they regarded as old ‘friends’ – these experiences, among others, created the belief in individuals that they were helpless. The lack of connection between cause and effect, the loss experienced by some as a result of change, and the lack of clarity re the values and direction of the new organisation have resulted in the belief that the situation was outside of their locus of control. However, the

respondents believed in themselves – they did not think that they were the cause of this situation, and they seemed to hold the view that the person or people who caused it should put it right. At the same time as being disappointed with the way things were, and with their own inability to act, respondents had a strong sense of their own self worth. It would seem reasonable to describe this organisation as displaying the characteristics of *universal learned helplessness*.

#### The behaviours which are reinforcing the beliefs

It would appear that the best available choice has been taken by respondents. This choice was to create a sense of belonging, safety and relative certainty by emulating the behaviours they saw around them (including those self-oriented behaviours at the highest levels of the organisation) and by colluding with the beliefs and views expressed by their colleagues. Group think, collective denial, the maintenance of confusion, and the continued use of the question 'how?' have supported them in holding on to their self-esteem, whilst at the same time ensuring that things remained the same, and so reminding them that the situation is hopeless. If nothing else was certain, at least they were certain about uncertainty. This would suggest an organisation in a state of *vicarious universal learned helplessness*.

#### The state of the organisation

Emotional states are the most immediate part of our experience, according to O'Connor (2001), who asserts that we create our own emotional states and are able to change them, although we will often claim that our emotional state has been caused by events outside of our control. He suggests that by becoming aware of our present state, which may be a response to an external event, we are in a better position to change it.

Our emotional states affect our capability. For example, when we experience anxiety it will affect our ability to perform. How well we perform depends on the state we are in. Trying to perform well whilst remaining in a state of anxiety is likely to lead to failure, and so O'Connor suggests that the first thing is to become aware of the state we are in, and then seek to change it. This will, in turn, improve our performance.

O'Connor's description of the 'baseline state' is useful here – he describes it as the state where we feel most at home – the most familiar state. Our 'baseline state' is a combination of our habitual thoughts and feelings, physical and mental.

O'Connor provides the following questions for readers to consider in the context of their own 'baseline state':

- *What parts of your environment support or limit your baseline state?*
- *What skills do you have in that state?*
- *What beliefs and values do you hold?*
- *How much is your normal state a conscious part of your identity?*
- *How has your baseline state changed over time?*
- *How long has it been the same?*
- *Can you point to a time when it fixed at what it is now?*
- *Have you modelled this state to anyone else?* O'Connor (2001), p.74

The purpose of these questions to enable the individual to consider whether they are satisfied with their 'baseline state', and how they might make it a healthier, more resourceful state.

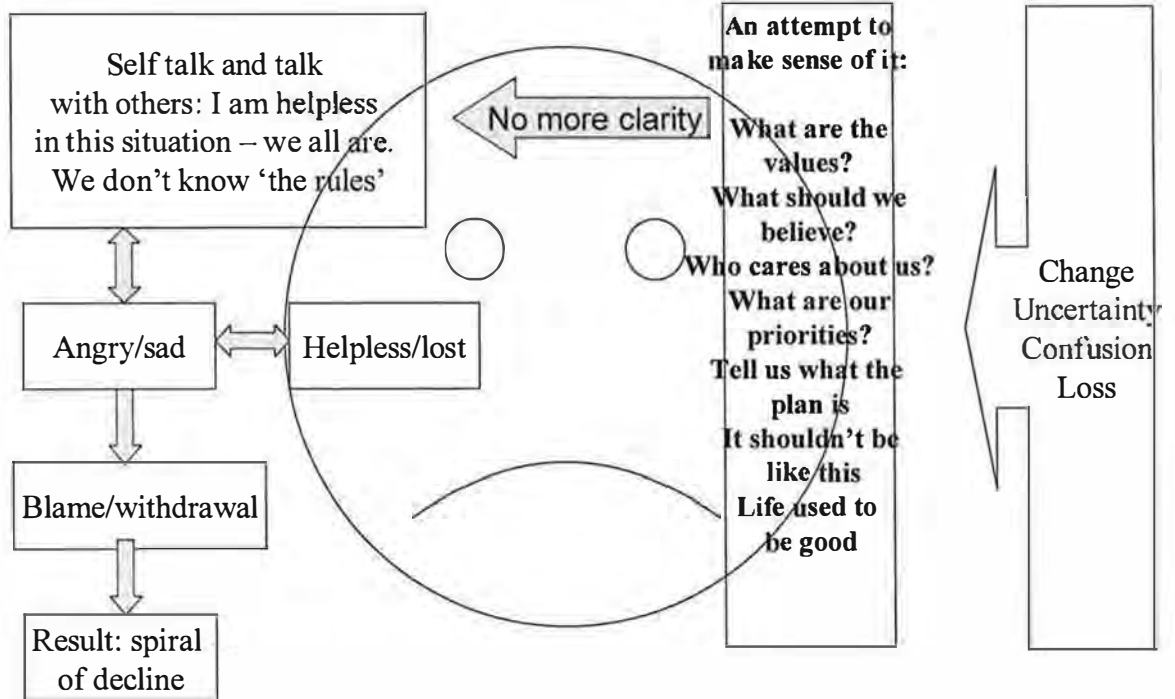
The data show an organisation in an *unresourceful state* – participants have expressed their feelings of hopelessness, of having given up, of anxiety, of despair and of anger. The environment supported and limited this

unresourceful state; individuals were acting in 'unskilled' ways (as described in the data – focusing on menial tasks and issues, sharing their frustrations with others, acting out their anger on colleagues), and respondents' beliefs were negative and they claimed their values were being compromised. There is certainly evidence to suggest that this emotional state had become a conscious part of who these people are (respondents talked of themselves as being part of the 'system', and they were aware of their own part in the whole). This prevailing state seems to have taken a hold on the organisation and it was having a direct impact on performance.

The data suggest that it had been this way for some time (i.e. since the first re-organisation, which began in 1996 – the fieldwork for this research was undertaken in 2001 - 2002). It would seem reasonable to assume that the state was 'fixed' around the time of re-organisation – i.e. somewhere during 1996, when the three councils began the work of re-organising into a unitary authority. The state was being modelled throughout the organisation, and new employees were very quickly learning the ways to think, see and feel within the organisation. The writers on NLP remind us that states are contagious – plenty of activity goes into the maintenance of beliefs and perspectives, as described above.

Figure 8, adapted from figure 7 in the previous chapter, is an attempt to capture the 'filtering' process – from having the experience of loss of control, to the search for rational answers, to the creation of a set of views through a personalised thought system (an internal map), to the processes undertaken to sustain this map of the world, and the subsequent effect of this map on our emotional state, our emotionally driven behaviours and the results of these behaviours.

Figure 8 - Experiences, beliefs and behaviours  
The process of 'filtering'



Source: Jenny Knight (2005), based on published work of writers in the fields of human psychology and organisational behaviour

The writers on NLP assert that we have choices about our emotional states. The message is straightforward – if we wish to change our state we can. However, if we are in an extremely negative state, it may be necessary to ‘break’ this state first before moving into a resourceful state. To ‘break state’ is to move out of a specific state and, initially, into neutral. ‘Pattern interrupt’ is an intervention to move someone from an intense negative state into neutral – and pattern interrupts are, according to O’Connor, the most powerful and effective ways of breaking state.

This organisation was, and it appears from anecdotal evidence still is, in an unresourceful state – displaying signs of vicarious universal learned helplessness, and trapped in habitual behaviours which serve to reinforce beliefs and militate against positive change.

Sennett’s view that continual external change can result in a loss of sense of self and sense of place within the wider context is what appears to be the case in this organisation. Sennett is talking about external change which is, to a greater or lesser degree, outside of our control. It is important to remember that the change we are talking about here is *climate* change, not structural or external change.

### **8.3 Pattern Interrupt – a brief explanation**

O’Connor et al provide examples of pattern interrupts – the use of humour, getting someone to *physically* change their position (move to another place) and distraction. They also suggest ways of eliciting more positive states in others, by modelling the desired state, by working with the individual to remind them of a time when they were in a positive state, or by telling a story which will elicit a positive state.



NLP calls any stimulus that changes our state an *anchor*. It is the connection of stimulus to response, without having to think. The sight and sound of certain things will change our state. Rituals and words are anchors. Anchors are built up randomly – some are neutral and some trigger unresourceful states. Many anchors are linked to the past and are out of date. O'Connor and McDermott refer to these as 'fossils'. These anchors, keeping the respondents in unresourceful states, are their past experiences and the beliefs attached to these experiences – repeated disappointment and uncertainty at work has made working life, for the respondents, an anchor for their negative state. By using anchors to *change* state, e.g. humour, physiology, thinking, we can interrupt patterns and move people from unresourceful into neutral, and then to resourceful. ('Re-programming')

'Pattern interrupt' is a method for changing emotional states, which impact on attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, and which have developed as a result of a set of experiences.

I have referred to this organisation as 'fragile' and 'unresourceful' earlier in this thesis – the descriptions were arrived at as a result of the circumstances (i.e. the regular changes in structures, the lack of clarity about the vision and priorities of the organisation and the low motivation and lack of belief in their ability to change the situation on the part of the respondents). The interview data provide a wealth of evidence of organisational fragility and lack of resourcefulness.

What would the opposite look like? According to Holbeche (2004), a 'high performing' organisation would be a desirable organisation to work for; it would be creative and knowledge-rich; it would be driven by its vision and values, and work would take place across organisational boundaries. The people in this organisation would be ready to try new things and be prepared to fail occasionally; would be aware of their shortcomings and clear about what they want to achieve. They would be setting themselves a series of targets and

would know when they are progressing/not progressing. Workers would question their own approaches to problems and issues, would find new ways to do things, would identify new needs and would think creatively about how to meet those needs. (Taken from presentation made to a Further Education Conference, in Sussex, March 2004). In other words, 'high performing' organisations are learning organisations – and, as Dilts has pointed out, real learning and subsequent change as a result of this learning is just as dependent on the development of personal beliefs and values and a sense of identity as they are on the acquisition of skills and behaviours. Individuals must be in *resourceful* states in order to be open to learning. So, for an organisation to become 'high performing' or 'strong', workers must be open to learning, and therefore to change. An organisation in a positive and resourceful state would be able to cope with and create change, as a result of its willingness to learn and take risks.

As we have seen from the learned helplessness model, what has been learned is self-sealing, i.e. that response and outcome are not connected and that this will always be the case; that the relationships between behaviours and outcomes are unclear, as a result of the experience of uncontrollability; that associations cannot be made as a result of random events and relationships and that levels of depression and anxiety develop as a result of the experience of uncontrollability. These, I suggest, are the *opposite* characteristics of a high performing, risk-taking, problem solving, learning and resourceful organisation.

What are the options for creating a resourceful state in this organisation? Whilst attempting to answer this question I will also address question number 6 – my final question.

#### 8.4 Question 6 - Where does the responsibility for change lie?

According to the respondents it does not lie with them. The responsibility is placed with someone else, but that person, or those people, were not identified by the respondents. Individuals talked of the 'top team' or 'managers' or of 'them' – using phrases such as 'they should' or 'everyone' or 'we'. When pushed to identify the person or people responsible for changing things, respondents were unable to say who this was. However, they were all clear that it was not their responsibility.

At this point it would be easy to decide that the change had to be driven by those people in the organisation with most power or influence, and that these people would be the leaders/managers in the organisation. However, before making a decision, it is worth while considering this question creatively. The question in its current form suggests that a) a person or identified group of people should take responsibility for changing the situation (perhaps the elusive person or people who created it), and that b) once we are clear about who they are, they can be told that they are responsible and they can put in place plans to improve the situation. What I think would be more useful is to consider the organisational potential, because *all* the respondents conveyed the desire for things to improve.

It would be easy to re-visit the possibility that these people are busy 'pursuing unhappiness' (to quote Watzlawick) – that they are 'enjoying' the comfort of this organisational learned helplessness because it shelters them from their own sense of responsibility and accountability for positively participating in change.

It would be argued that those people who have not left the organisation are now 'sleeping' on the job. They have manufactured beliefs and behaviours to stay comfortable; they are avoiding admitting that they have the power to influence

their environment, because this admission would make them responsible for the way that they apply this influence.

If we believe that this is the case then any intervention is likely to be flawed because of the assumptions which have influenced its formation. The identification of possibilities and potential for change depends on an approach to the situation which begins with positive presuppositions. Based on the data we can presuppose that there is a strong desire for things to improve in this organisation.

One of the respondents, struggling to understand why they were not challenging the situation, expressed the view that some recognition of, and care for, them were needed before they would feel able to act.

*‘.....maybe some affirmation helps before we can challenge. Love, maybe....’*

This comment was made by the individual in the midst of statements made in frustration, and expletives used to describe ‘them’. Respondents had often expressed their view that they were not ‘in the club’ or that no-one cared about them, or that they felt invisible. The data seem to be telling us that there is potential for movement given the creation of an environment where people feel cared for. The nature, style and organisation of leadership are critical to the creation of this environment, as are the principles and attitudes held by those wishing to create change.

In the spirit of appreciative enquiry (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987), which again accords with the NLP perspectives and models and is based on a grounded observation of ‘the best of what is’ and then articulating the vision of what might be; I propose to explore the ‘best of what is’ as a way of exploring the existing potential for change. In short, I propose to ‘look on the bright side’–

not in a state of naivety – rather as a conscious attempt to find some levers for change.

What is good about the organisation? It is possible to look at the data and say ‘not much, really’ – but there are some clues. The respondents are creative, articulate, witty, energised by the opportunity to examine and reflect on their situation, confident in their own abilities and potential and respectful of their peers. Many have spoken warmly about the people in the organisation, describing them as ‘wonderful’, ‘talented’ etc. They have engaged in coping strategies, and this suggests that they are not passive victims. Mikulincer’s description of effortful cognitive behaviours and manoeuvres which people employ to survive the situation reminds us that energy is being used – energy which could be redirected. The resources are there – one might say that this is probably all that is necessary as a starting point – creativity, cognitive skills, energy, humour, confidence. The *unresourceful state* is the problem – and the impact of this pervading state on service provision. The situation *is* serious, and has been identified as serious via an objective assessment of the performance of this local authority.

How, then, could these people be ‘liberated’ from their ‘psychic prisons’, their basic assumptions, their shared beliefs and their self-sealing behaviours? What would enable these people to take other choices, and provide them with the opportunity to view the situation differently? How could these people come to understand that their behaviours are achieving specific outcomes, and that these outcomes are merely reinforcing the problem?

*‘It (work) is about a search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, in short, for a life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.... ‘*  
(Studs Terkel, taken from Cooper and Hingley (1985) p. 43

#### **8.4.1. Leadership and responsibility for change**

I have avoided identifying a person or group of individuals *responsible* for creating change. The council's structure is set up as a bureaucracy, and the expectation which has been articulated by respondents is that 'managers', 'top team', 'the leaders' will make this change. The problem, as pointed out throughout this thesis, is that none of the managers/leaders interviewed considered it their responsibility. Given the way the organisation is structured and has been designed, it would seem important to briefly consider the nature and positioning of leadership (as opposed to management) and its potential to create change in the organisation. Leadership and management are complimentary systems of action existing within organisations, but for the purposes of this study it would seem appropriate to focus on leadership and its part in creating positive organisational change. The peer review talked of transactional rather than transformational 'leadership', which suggests that those in leadership or management positions within the organisation were inclined towards management practices rather than leadership behaviours. This would account for the emphasis on process rather than outcomes, and the existence of a large number of procedures which appeared to result in very little action.

The overall message from writers on management and leadership is that leadership is about change, whereas management is about order and predictability. It is for this reason I propose to focus on the nature and positioning of leadership as I consider where the responsibility for change lies.

There is a great deal of literature focusing on leadership and its fundamental role in creating organisational change. Leaders are described in numerous ways, for example as action-centred, transformational, change agents, developers, servants, visionaries etc. Models and theories of leadership have been developed, such as situational, contingency, trait, transactional,

behavioural etc. I have chosen not to undertake a detailed exploration of the writings on leadership at this stage in this thesis because this would not contribute to the main purpose of the study. However, the following perspectives have emerged as relevant in the light of the conclusions derived from the data.

Handy's (1993) view that there is no 'right' answer, and Mullins' (1999) assertion that there is no 'best' model or style of leadership confirms that there is no overarching definition. In considering this question, therefore, I have taken note of the *principles and philosophies* which underpin effective leadership, as described by a range of writers, for example Kline (1999), Arie De Geus (1997), Covey (1989), Lewin and Regine (1999), Gallwey (2000), Jaworski (1998), Greenleaf (1997), West-Burnham (2004) and Zohar (1997, 2000), and of the use of metaphor by writers such as Olivier (2001) and Dunlop (1997). The broad themes emerging from these writers are as follows:

- the responsibility of the leader to distribute leadership throughout the organisation
- the leader as a role model, displaying characteristics and attitudes that others wish to emulate
- the importance of emergence and self-organisation in the workplace
- the need for meaning and value from our work

The above themes are an extreme distillation of the copious amounts of literature focusing on leadership. They also represent the aspects of the literature which I think are most pertinent to this study.

I suggest that there is the potential to distribute leadership within this council, because, as with most other councils, street-level bureaucracy exists. Lipsky (1980), writing in the field of social and public policy, talks of front line workers in public sector organisations developing rigid practices and conforming to self

imposed rules. This is not seen as a positive trait by Lipsky, who describes this as a kind of 'survival mechanism'; workers with the best of intentions doing less for customers than they might have. However, he makes the point that ideologies provide frameworks in terms of priorities and the achievement of goals, and this provides a clue as to the potential for leadership at this level. At the moment, those people providing front-line services in the authority have expressed the view that they are not noticed, don't feel valued and are not consulted and involved as decisions are taken. They have negative feelings about the organisation, and some have expressed their belief that money is not being spent on front-line services, but on unimportant jobs within the organisation.

*'We'd rather have six more strategists and get rid of six home- helps to pay for it – gloss rather than helping the OAPs get through their twilight years'*

We have evidence of the impact on service delivery of these beliefs and opinions, and some indication that individuals genuinely believe that their ethics are offended by organisational actions (see the quotations set out earlier in this thesis).

Lipsky reminds us that we should make the most of the reality that street-level bureaucrats primarily determine policy implementation – not their superiors. He also asserts that the street level bureaucrat needs rewards for effective performance. His definition of reward is consultation, involvement, peer review – in short, attention. He advocates breaking down the isolation of the street level bureaucrat, but doing it via involvement and recognition of their contribution; by tapping into the ideologies of the people operating on the front line, and by involving them in the decision making processes and recognising their contribution and potential. The leader presiding over the diminution of his or her power should give away power to the front line service providers. This



would also develop a culture of self-organisation and would create meaning and value for workers.

Leading in the distribution of leadership and then modelling behaviours and attitudes as a way of creating change will, I suspect, be a lengthy process. My view is that the deeply held beliefs existing in the organisation about the way things are done, the inequity, the helplessness and the lack of personal power will take some time to change. The commitment from leaders within the organisation to give away their power; actions which confirm that this is the case: the conscious adoption of positive presuppositions and values and the overt display of behaviours which are in keeping with these presuppositions and values – this is the way that I believe this organisation will learn to trust itself again, and ultimately change for the better.

#### **8.4.2 Summary of response to question 6**

*'In turbulent times we look for certainty and sure authority. We want to be followers, not leaders, even in a small way. We want 'them' to solve our dilemmas, and give us back a quiet life....'* Handy (1994), p. 93

My question was where **does the responsibility for change lie?** I suggest that because it is assumed that the responsibility lies with the leaders (because of the existence of a hierarchy within a rational-legal bureaucracy) then, to a degree, it has to. But the potential for change lies all over the organisation – with the front line service providers, with those people who have showed their creative energy, their sense of humour, their willingness to engage in the problem solving process (during the research), their expressed admiration for one another and their articulated desire for things to be another way. 100% of respondents wanted things to be changed for the better. The potential is with the workforce. My suggestion is, then, that key 'leaders' should preside over the process of letting go of power, using valid and overt systems of reward and

sanction to ensure that this happens. It would not be difficult to identify the leaders with the highest profile, and who are perceived to have the right to 'lead'. Leaders are rewarded for giving up power, and sanctioned for holding on to it. This needs to be done visibly. Leadership will then be distributed. Nothing else must change at this point – no roles, jobs, positions within the organisation should be threatened as a result of this process. It is necessary, then for rewards and sanctions to be other than dismissal or formal reprimand - for example, non-inclusion or the removal of privileges. Once this is happening, the message is clear – everyone is responsible for changing this organisation's climate. To maintain status, those leaders in leadership 'positions' should do so predominantly through their behaviours and attitudes rather than by virtue of their position, expertise or their access to rewards or sanctions. This prescription sits comfortably alongside Greenleaf's (1997) description of the 'servant leader'.

## **8.5 Conclusions**

This chapter provides some clues as to the potential for change within the organisation. Kanter (2003) states that the one thing all leaders have in common who are working to turn organisations round who are in a 'cycle of decline' is their commitment to restoring confidence through empowerment. She gives examples of how this is done – the replacement of denial with dialogue, blame with respect, isolation with collaboration and helplessness with opportunities for initiative. She asserts that turning around an organisation in this cycle of decline is when leadership matters most. My own view is that leadership attitudes and behaviours and the commitment to the distribution of leadership is what will turn this organisation from an unresourceful to a resourceful state.

# Chapter 9

## Metamorphosis

### The Unresourceful Organisation

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## Chapter 9

### Metamorphosis

The Unresourceful Organisation

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*'The status quo is painless but normally fatal'*

**W Edwards Deming**

#### 9.1 Introduction – looking back

This research process has sought to provide answers to the following key questions about the organisation under consideration:

- What is the most significant problem facing this organisation, which is the root cause of all the others?
- Why do employees appear to be locked into behaviours which are self-defeating? Why don't they try doing things differently?
- What would staff say about the organisation? Do they have anything else to say which would shed light on what is blocking good performance?

Chapter one of this thesis provided the reader with contextual information about the organisation, its recent history and experiences and the challenges it was facing at the time of undertaking the research. Poor performance had been highlighted as a problem for the organisation, as had ways of working which militated against high quality service delivery. The reasons for this were unclear, and the importance of finding them was discussed in this part of the thesis.

In the review of the literature a range of theories and perspectives have been explored relating to culture, climate, organisational behaviours, individual psychology and addiction, in an attempt to identify some possible answers to the presenting questions. This examination of the literature provided me with food for thought as well as raising further questions, which have been considered in the light of the data.

The research method is described in detail in chapter 3, as is the application of the NLP meta-model to the interviewing process. The reasons for applying the meta-model is explained in more detail in chapter 4, as are methods of triangulation, including the 'shadow consultancy' approach.

In chapter 5 I have presented the data in its 'raw' form, providing examples of quotes to illustrate the dominant response to each question. The following chapter (chapter 6) de-constructed the data, using three of the questions which had emerged for me during the research process. These questions provided me with a starting point for a more detailed analysis of the responses. The following questions supported my exploration of the findings:

- Is the culture of the organisation a direct result of the continual change?
- Why is it that respondents are only able to focus on their 'hygiene factors' and seem unable to reach higher levels of motivation?
- How much are the people in the organisation feeding their own problem, by acting out negative behaviours, by disengaging rather than challenging and by projecting all the problems onto others?

The use of these questions, combined with further exploration of literature relating to what makes organisations and people 'tick' and relating this directly to the data, enabled me to reach certain preliminary conclusions. These conclusions were about the climate of the organisation, the impact of change on the organisation, motivation levels within the organisation and the positive or

negative impact on the climate of current attitudes and behaviours. At this stage I have suggested that self-centred behaviours exist within the organisation as a result of a climate of uncertainty and confusion; there is strong resistance to taking personal responsibility for creating change despite the fact that respondents have expressed their desire to see change; there are low levels of motivation and a tendency to blame others for the current situation. There is a lack of clarity about the relationship between actions and outcomes, and a lack of trust within the organisation. People did not appear to feel cared for, and were not inclined to try and improve the situation, expressing the view that it was not within their power to make things better.

The results of this analysis of the data suggested the applicability of the learned helplessness phenomenon to this organisation. If respondents believed that the causes of the problems are outside of their control and so are choosing not to act to effect change, did this imply learned helplessness?

In chapter 7 of this thesis the theory of learned helplessness is explored in detail, including the reformulated model (universal helplessness) and the notion of vicarious helplessness is introduced. The model is examined in the light of the data as well as alongside a range of other perspectives on organisational life and individual psychology. Two key questions supported my consideration of the model in the light of the data and a range of alternative perspectives. These were:

- Are they choosing to see things in a particular way because it makes it unnecessary for them to actually think?
- Is it all really a problem, given that no-one seems to be doing anything about it?

This process enabled me to identify possible causes for the development of the condition, the behaviours we might see as a result of the condition, and the

development of a more complex strain of learned helplessness – *organisational vicarious universal learned helplessness* (OVULH).

In the penultimate chapter I have suggested ways in which this organisation might be changed for the better, through the distribution of leadership.

To summarise, the process of finding some answers to my questions has required the implementation of a robust qualitative research process, involved the application of the NLP meta-model to the process of research interviewing, and the use of range of methods of triangulation. Making sense of the data necessitated a detailed examination of a wide range of theoretical perspectives, which have been discussed throughout this thesis. The perspectives of writers on organisational culture and behaviours as well as those of, for example, philosophers, psychologists, psychotherapists, linguists and social policy theorists have all been explored in the process of making sense of the data. Analysis of the data led to the development of a particular model of learned helplessness applicable to the organisation in question.

## **9.2 Learned helplessness re-visited**

In its most straightforward form, learned helplessness provides some explanation as to why the individuals within the researched organisation are 'stuck'. Broadly, learned helplessness provides us with the following clues:

- helplessness can be induced as a result of failing to find a relationship between action and outcome
- once helplessness is induced, then the condition can transfer into other situations where there *is* a relationship between action and outcome. In other words, where an individual *is* able to control their situation, they may

continue to believe that they are helpless and powerless, based on previous experience.

- once this belief has taken hold, the individual is unable to *unlearn* helplessness when exposed to relationships between behaviours and outcomes.
- as a result of the experience of random events, the individual becomes unable to make associations and connections between actions and outcomes
- the experience of uncontrollability can lead to anxiety and depression.

One of the key elements of learned helplessness is that it is about an internal 'state', rather than an informed choice not to act because there are no positive outcomes.

It is fair to say that respondents have consistently discussed their lack of clarity about the systems, processes and rules within the organisation, and their confusion about the relationship between action and reward or outcome. However, to stop at this point would have left some questions unanswered – specifically

- a) Why did participants appear to be so self-confident, despite their levels of confusion?
- b) How was the condition of learned helplessness being sustained over such a long period of time, and with new cohorts of employees from outside the organisation?

Respondents did not blame themselves for the situation – the data provide ample evidence that this is the case. Those employees who were relatively new to the organisation, or employed on temporary contracts, expressed the view



that they too were becoming helpless and powerless, unable to create change or improve the situation.

### **9.3 Universal learned helplessness re-visited**

The reformulated model of learned helplessness is informed by attribution theory and by theories of 'locus of control'. The model provides us with a way of understanding why, if the respondents regarded themselves as helpless, their self-esteem remained intact. This addresses question a) above.

When events are outside of our control we seek explanations. The explanations we come up with will affect the way we feel about ourselves and our choices about our behaviours. The 'universal learned helplessness' model, as distinct from the 'learned helplessness' model, allows for the circumstance where it is believed by the individual concerned that anyone in their situation would be helpless. The causes of the individual's experience of helplessness lie outside of themselves and their locus of control, and the ability to change the situation is not with them, but somewhere else. In this case, self-esteem will remain intact, and no action will be taken to try and change the situation.

This reformulated model provides an answer to question a) above. The respondents did not see themselves as responsible for the current situation, and generally believed that the circumstances were outside of their locus of control. The words 'they' 'them' and 'management' were used to identify those people responsible, but when pushed participants remained unable to identify the key person or people responsible for the situation. However, the prevailing view expressed was that it was outside of their individual control. This view ensured that levels of self-esteem remained intact as well as ensuring that minimal action was taken. The data show us that respondents felt they had much to offer, that they were keen to provide good services and that they were being frustrated in their attempts to effect change, or to make an impact. Examples were given by

respondents about ways in which they filled their time, given their belief that they could not influence or change the situation. For example

- *'I try to get in touch with my spiritual side'*
- *'Talk to other colleagues...express my frustrations..'*
- *'You choose the things you do and you don't do...'*

#### **9.4 Vicarious universal learned helplessness revisited**

An answer to question b) is to be found in the explanation of 'vicarious' or 'modelled' helplessness. In this case, an individual need not have had a direct experience of uncontrollability in order to become helpless. They may just have seen the effects of events on others. In other words, helplessness can be 'infectious' – we learn the state from others who are modelling it. In the case of groups working together to solve the unsolvable, the group can become helpless, and will then act in a helpless fashion when tackling other tasks. The state of universal helplessness can be sustained, then, by both modelled behaviours and attitudes and by group experience.

The consideration of the data has led me to believe that this organisation is displaying the signs of a condition that can be best described as *Organisational Vicarious Universal Learned Helplessness*. The people interviewed believed that they were helpless, but that the causes and remedies lay outside of their control, and so they did not blame themselves. This kept their levels of self-esteem reasonably high. The state of helplessness was being modelled within the organisation and became 'infectious'. The data show that individuals were learning helplessness from others, either via observation or conversation or by experiences of helplessness in a group setting. Respondents talked of, for example, *'networking with like-minded people'*, or *'sharing this with a few people...'* in an attempt to make sense of the situation through conversation. Others shared their observations, e.g. *'I've only been here six months and I'm*

*already frustrated. Now I think just do your job and keep your head down', or '...I'm actively trying to be this way in order to fit in...'*

Respondents talked of good relationships with colleagues and team members, and their tendency to use these relationships as support mechanisms. *'I sustain good relationships with champions/protectors..'*, or *'I look to the union, We stick together, collectively defend ourselves...'*. This group activity, where perceptions are reinforced through conversations and it is collectively agreed that the situation is unsolvable, would lead to helplessness at group level, as discussed in chapter 7.

### **9.5 The component parts of the Organisational Vicarious Universal Learned Helplessness Model (OVULH)**

The OVULH model has been arrived at via a detailed examination of the data and related to the literature.

Whilst learned helplessness provided a partial answer, which was arrived at only after lengthy exploration of a range of other perspectives, the additional 'universal' and 'vicarious' elements provide a model which captures the state of the organisation in question. However, I now propose to present the reader with what I believe are the component parts of the model of OVULH based on the analysis of the data in this study. These have been identified by taking into account the diverse perspectives explored in this thesis which have enabled me to present the OVULH as the model. I propose to 'build' the model, beginning with an explanation of the causes, moving on to discuss universality and vicariousness, the causes and the beliefs and behaviours which support these aspects of the model, and then to explore the organisation as a whole system, and what is sustaining the problem.

## Figure 9 – The Organisational Vicarious Universal Learned Helplessness (OVUHL) Model

### Stage 1 - Learning to be helpless

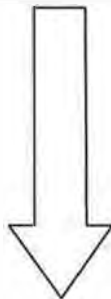
Staff become confused and uncertain at the time of large scale, repeated change. Decisions lack clarity, the process feels confused and the outcomes are unpredictable and do not appear to relate to inputs. No relationship can be found between performance and reward. Staff do not know how to take control of their destiny, and feel unable to influence the circumstances. This results in the following symptoms:

- anxiety and depression
- an unwillingness to take risk
- the inability to learn when actions and outcomes are connected
- coping strategies – avoidance of situations which may be uncontrollable and the re- organisation of time and energy in ways which ensure some sense of personal safety/security

Causes: change, uncertainty, unpredictability

Behaviours/responses: shock, lack of trust, lack of understanding, confusion, anxiety, depression, passivity, aggression, focus on 'hygiene' factors.

*At this point, the organisation still has the potential to 'recover'. There are some individuals who have not had experiences which have rendered them helpless, and so it is not a problem for the whole organisation (yet). The climate remains malleable; individuals who are learning to be helpless are still seeking clarity and security. If this is not forthcoming, feelings of helplessness remain and the problem grows, by...*



**.....stage 2 – teaching others to be helpless (the development of vicarious learned helplessness)**

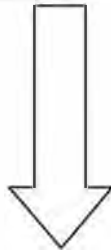
Groups working together have difficulty finding ways to solve problems because of the lack of clarity and the confusion about the relationship between cause and effect. Individuals in the organisation who have not had a *personal* experience which has led to feelings of helplessness observe helplessness all around them, experience *group* inability to find solutions to problems, and engage in conversations which reinforce the fact that individuals and groups within the organisation are helpless. This teaches them that they too are helpless. We observe:

- a perceived inability to find answers to questions, inducing helplessness at group level
- cognitive deficit – even when it may be possible to solve problems, the lack of ability to engage with them creatively
- helplessness being modelled and learned throughout the organisation
- the creation of explanations which reinforce the belief of helplessness
- the lack of discussion of the undiscussable – no-one will challenge the notion of helplessness (however it is being expressed), because this may result in their exclusion from the group
- the existence of 'group think' – the reinforcement of beliefs which support behaviours.

Causes: lack of clarity about the 'rules of the game', the need to create some sense of security and 'belonging' and the desire to avoid any further anxiety by maintaining the status quo.

Behaviours/responses: blame, humour, story-telling, 'busy-ness', collusion, disengagement, unwillingness to engage in problem solving, preferring to opt for a simple solution.

*The organisation is teaching itself to be helpless, through experience in groups and as individuals, and through observation of others. These experiences of group helplessness and the modelled behaviours result in*



**..... stage 3 – the development of clarity about the causes of helplessness (the onset of universal learned helplessness)**

Helpless individuals observe that others appear to be in the same situation as they are – unable to control their circumstances at work and unable to make clear connections between actions and outcomes. These perceptions are shared in conversations throughout the organisation, and via experiences of group helplessness. Therefore, despite feelings of helplessness, self-esteem remains high, due to

- the belief that the circumstances lie outside the locus of control of the individual
- the belief that *anyone* in the same situation would be unable to change things for the better.

These beliefs support and sustain certain behaviours and decisions, but are not causes in themselves.

Causes: The beliefs develop as a result of the need to find some causal explanation for the feelings of helplessness and to raise levels of self-esteem.

Behaviours/responses: observation of others in the same situation, group and one to one discussions where experiences are shared, blaming 'them' for the situation, creating personal boundaries or loci of control as self protection. Projection – 'they make me do it'. The decision not to act to try and create change or improve the situation.

*At this point, the climate is becoming less malleable as individuals withdraw and are less prepared to take any personal risks for the sake of the organisation because of their expectation that outcomes will not be predictable. The existence of 'group think' and the experience of helplessness at group level provides individuals with confirmation that the situation is outside of their locus of control. This results in individuals at all levels of the organisation avoiding risk and choosing not to take action. Over time, beliefs and behaviours become 'the norm', or 'habits' and the end result is.....*



**.....stage 4 – the organisation as a closed system**

Displaying the following characteristics:

- energy being used in the avoidance of real issues and in fighting internal 'battles'
- little if any energy available for work, because of the above
- defence mechanisms, over time, become an ingrained aspect of organisational life with which old and new members of the organisation must come to terms. They are 'habits'.
- behaviours include projection ("see what they made me do"), blame, aggressive behaviour towards colleagues, 'group-think', avoidance of risk and the creation of boundaries or loci of control.

*The organisation is 'stuck'. Behaviours are habitual and Organisational Vicarious Universal Learned Helplessness has produced an organisational state of 'unresourcefulness', as a chronic condition.*

This is the organisation in a chronic state of unresourcefulness, as a result of *Organisational Vicarious Universal Learned Helplessness*. Helplessness, habit and homeostasis.

## **9.6 The creation of the 'resourceful' organisation**

In the penultimate chapter I have identified ways in which this organisation may be helped to change – by the adoption of positive presuppositions; by the distribution of leadership and by those individuals in leadership 'positions' acquiring and maintaining personal status via their attitudes and behaviours.

How would we create and sustain an organisation at the other end of the spectrum; a 'resourceful' organisation? Holbeche (2004) provides suggestions as to the key ingredients of a 'high performing' organisation, and these have been outlined in the penultimate chapter, namely:

- creativity
- an abundance of knowledge
- driven by the organisation's vision and values
- cross-organisational working and sharing of knowledge
- risk-taking
- reflective
- open to learning

These ingredients will exist in a climate of where workers trust each other. Trust is developed through observation and positive experience.

Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell's (1997) definition of the learning company, developed further from their original definition, is as follows:

*'A learning company is an organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and consciously transforms itself and its context'. (p.3)*

An organisation operating in this way would be using creativity; taking risks; engaging in 'double-loop learning', i.e. seeking out the root causes of problems, rather than tackling the symptoms (Argyris, 1990), and sharing knowledge



across the organisation. For an organisation to become 'high performing' or a 'learning organisation', workers must be *open* to learning, and therefore to change. The pre-requisite is 'resourcefulness'.

Set out below are some suggested methods by which resourceful organisations can be created and sustained, thereby ensuring good performance and continual learning.

### Figure 10 – The Creation of the Resourceful Organisation

#### Stage 1 – Providing clarity

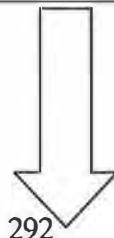
Despite complex change, staff remain clear about how decisions are made and are able to see the relationships between actions and outcomes. Feedback is provided as a matter of course – poor performance is dealt with appropriately, good performance is rewarded appropriately. Staff are given permission to take control of their working lives, and are invited to contribute to the decision making processes. Decisions are taken with integrity. This results in:

- collective understanding of the 'rules of the game'
- a willingness to take risks
- security about the relationship between actions and outcomes
- energy used appropriately to achieve organisational objectives

Causes: certainty about others' intentions and, in most cases, the ability to predict outcomes as a result of actions

Behaviours/responses: creativity, risk taking, dialogue, trust, mutual support, desire for self fulfilment

*At this point, the organisation has the potential for success. The climate is positive and individuals are being provided with clarity and a sense of security. However, there is still potential for things to go wrong until staff believe that this is the way the organisation is always going to conduct itself. This belief and trust in the organisation will be developed by.....*



**.....stage 2 – organisational conversations – teaching each other it is encouraged and appropriate to take risks and influence circumstances**

Groups working together find ways of solving problems by considering root causes, and not just symptoms (double loop learning). Where individuals lack clarity they can seek support from colleagues, who will share positive experiences, knowledge and information. This is encouraged by leaders, and time is set aside for organisational conversations. People learn that they are in control of their own working lives. This results in

- creative engagement with problems at both individual and group levels
- positive behaviours being modelled and learned throughout the organisation
- open discussion, healthy and constructive debate
- honest and supportive feedback, and help provided where performance is weak

Causes: clarity about the 'rules of the game', a sense of security and 'belonging' and the basis upon which to take creative risks for the organisation

Behaviours/responses: humour, debate, testing new ideas, reflection

*The organisation, at all levels, is teaching itself that it is creative and dynamic.*

*This knowledge results in*



**..... stage 3 – the development of clarity about ‘the way things are done around here’**

Individuals observe that others are in the same situation as they are - able to control their circumstances at work and able to make clear connections between actions and outcomes. These perceptions are shared in conversations throughout the organisation, and via positive experiences. Leaders regularly remind staff that this is the case, and encourage debate and dialogue. Self-esteem is high, due to

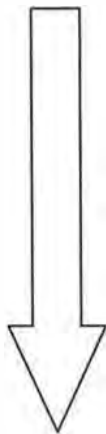
- the belief that circumstances are within the locus of control of the individual
- the belief that *anyone* in these circumstances can create positive change, at whatever level and in any part of the organisation

These beliefs support and sustain certain behaviours and decisions, including group working, sharing knowledge, challenging the status quo and seeking support

Causes: The beliefs develop as a result of positive experiences, observation and conversations.

Behaviours/responses: observation of others in the same situation, group and one to one discussions where experiences are shared.

*At this point, the climate is positive and individuals are prepared to take personal risks for the sake of the organisation, knowing that they will be supported and rewarded appropriately. Repeated positive experiences create a climate where individuals regard risk taking, knowledge sharing and learning as ‘the norm’. Their beliefs about the organisation influence their behaviours and decisions.*



#### .....stage 4 – the resourceful organisation

Displaying the following characteristics:

- energy being used to achieve the organisation's objectives
- creative problem solving, open dialogue, feedback and reflection
- sharing of knowledge with existing and new members of the organisation
- change-adaptable

*This organisation is one where people genuinely believe in their own value and the fact that they can influence change. These beliefs have developed over time, as a result of observation, conversation and personal experience. These beliefs result in positive behaviours and positive interaction, and the positive experiences arising from these behaviours serve to reinforce the beliefs. This is the best kind of self sealing environment!*

Resourceful organisations take time to develop – positive behaviours need to become as 'habitual' as negative ones. To complete the Aristotle quote, then, used at the beginning of Chapter 7,

*'We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.'*

## 9.7 Contribution to Knowledge

In this thesis, I have sought to understand the dynamics of one organisation – my original desire was to find out what lay behind this organisation's performance deficits. It appeared that the organisation's performance would not change until the reasons for the existing performance deficits were identified. My contribution to knowledge is set out below:

First, I have applied concepts which have been developed to explain individual behaviour to explain the behaviour of a whole organisation. I have assembled a set of psychological concepts in a new configuration, i.e. into a new theory about

what it means for an organisation to be 'stuck'. As a result of a protracted period of change and uncertainty, this organisation is displaying characteristics which accord with the model of organisational, vicarious, universal learned helplessness (OVULH). *This is a contribution to knowledge at the substantive level.*

Second, I have discovered that the application of the NLP meta-model is a valuable tool for critical questioning, and I would recommend this approach to other researchers seeking to undertake qualitative research of the kind I have described in this thesis. *The application of the NLP meta-model to the research interviews represents a contribution to methodological knowledge.*

As well as informing my approach to the research, the NLP model also provided me with a reference point against which to consider the data, and to formulate proposals for change – specifically related to the nature and positioning of leadership. Whilst the model is traditionally applied to individuals, it is my view that specific concepts and techniques could usefully be applied to whole organisations or systems.

## **9.8 The generalizability of this research**

Much has been written on the issue of generalizability for qualitative researchers. Patton (1980), Noblit and Hare (1988), Guba and Lincoln (1981, 1982) and Stake (1978, 1995), among others, have all dealt with this issue in some depth. Guba and Lincoln's stance on the issue is useful when considering the generalizability of this study:

*'It is virtually impossible to imagine any human behaviour that is not heavily mediated by the context in which it occurs. One can easily*

*conclude that generalizations that are intended to be context free will have little that is useful to say about human behaviour'. 1981, p. 62*

Guba and Lincoln assert that generalizations are neither time-nor-context free, but that some transferability of hypotheses may be possible from situation to situation, depending on degrees of similarity. They suggest replacing the concept of generalizability with that of 'fittingness' – i.e. the degree to which contexts are sufficiently congruent, making it feasible to apply hypotheses across contexts. Goetz and LeCompte (1984) also suggest that a detailed description will allow decisions to be made about the extent to which findings from one study are applicable to other situations. They use the terms 'comparability' and 'translatability', describing 'comparability' as referring to

*'the degree to which components of the study – including the units of analysis, concepts generated, population characteristics, and settings – are sufficiently well described and defined that other researchers can use the results of the study as a basis for comparison'. (p.228).*

Translatability refers to a clear description of one's theoretical stance and research techniques.

Stake (1978, 1995) agrees with critics of qualitative case study research that it is difficult to confidently generalize from a single case to a target population of which that case is a member, since single members do not necessarily represent target populations.

The writings in this area would appear to suggest that there is general consensus in key areas. Gomm, Hammersley and Foster (2000) provide details of these areas. They identify broad agreement that generalizability in the sense

of producing theories which are universally applicable is not a useful goal of qualitative research. They also identify the broad agreement that whilst generalizability as the search for broadly applicable theories/laws is rejected, the idea that studies in one situation can be used to speak or to help form a judgement about other situations is accepted.

### **9.9 A possible way forward – the applicability of the OVULH model to other organisations**

There are a number of issues I have not explored in any depth in this thesis, because of time and resource limitations. I have drawn from a range of writers, who present perspectives on organisations in decline, organisational dynamics and cultures as a result of change, and defensive behaviours in organisations. It is clear that organisational climates *similar to* the one described above exist in other places – Hayes (1992) writes about Plutex – an organisation living with the consequences of merger. Kanter (2003) describes the circumstances in one commercial organisation, where confidence in the company was lost by employees, as a result of a market downturn. More recently, Holbeche and Springett (2004) have undertaken research on meaning in the workplace – researching 734 organisations from all sectors. Their findings are important – disenchantment with the workplace is evident, and people working in larger organisations appear to experience less meaning than those in smaller organisations. When work and the workplace lack meaning Holbeche and Springett assert that morale suffers, people look for other employment or seek self-employment. Change will become difficult to manage in these circumstances. Holbeche and Springett identify spiritual leadership, social responsibility, close alignment between organisational values and practices and an emphasis on team working and community as ingredients of high performing, meaningful working environments. These ingredients do not appear to be evident in the organisation I have researched. The lack of meaning described

by Holbeche and Springett accords with the lack of clarity, confusion, depression and lack of trust emerging from the data in this research case study. Respondents repeatedly discussed the lack of alignment between espoused values and actual practice.

Roffey Park's 2005 annual survey into the state of the workplace shows that a period of unprecedented change has created new problems within organisations, including a problem of commitment. The research shows that 92% of those managers researched (618 in total) have experienced organisational change, and have experienced some level of disappointment regarding the consolidation of and learning from change. Work-related stress is significant and commitment to organisational life appears to be waning. Holbeche and McCartney (2005) talk of managers being less willing to 'go the extra mile', and more determined to get their own needs met by their organisation. 25% of managers surveyed claim to have lost trust in leaders. and 53% claim that conflict has increased in their organisation over the past two years. 65% of those surveyed say that they are searching for meaning in their working lives. My own work in other parts of the public sector has provided me with anecdotal evidence to indicate high levels of dissatisfaction and unhappiness amongst employees, who talk of lack of leadership, lack of trust in their leaders/managers, too much change and uncertainty etc. It would seem, then, that the problems experienced in the council I have researched may not be unique. However, the extent of the problem in relation to other organisations is unclear.

Whilst seeking to get to the heart of performance deficits in the council I have researched, and identifying a range of employee perceptions, beliefs and behaviours which have led to the development of a climate of unresourcefulness, I have not compared this organisation to any others – either in local government, the public sector in general or across sectors. I have not



developed 'thick descriptions' of more than just the site I have been studying. My purpose, in undertaking this research, was to get to the heart of *this* organisation's issues. The literature would suggest, however, that these problems are not unique to the researched organisation, and that they exist to a greater or lesser degree within other organisations and across sectors. What I do not know, from my research, is how the deficits within the organisation examined compare with those examined elsewhere.

In order to find this out it would be necessary to undertake similar research within a range of organisations, and to set this research in the organisational context (in accordance with Guba and Lincoln's views). I suggest that this would be a complex piece of work which requires the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding of each organisation's circumstances, history and reason for being. By doing this it would be possible to make some assessment of the extent of the problem in relation to the circumstances. The reader will note that I have made the decision that the issues I have identified *are* important for this organisation – this decision was based on my knowledge of the organisation's reason for existence, i.e. to provide services for local residents, and its current performance. There are many other local issues which I have been unable to explore in any depth in this work – simply because in doing so the organisation would have been identifiable. These issues will no doubt have an impact on the ease with which the organisation's state can be changed, and they would have to be included in a process of deciding 'fittingness'.

In this thesis I have avoided spending too much time focusing on the wider local government context. It was not my intention to try and demonstrate that all local councils will experience the same problems in terms of their employees' perceptions and motivation levels. However, this organisation experiences similar pressures to those experienced by many other local councils. Joyce (1999, 2000) reminds us that the public services went through a very difficult

time during the 1980s and 1990s and Wilson and Game (2002) identify the most prominent themes of local government during the last decade, illustrating the high levels of change and uncertainty experienced across the sector.

Competition, democratic accountability, modernisation, diminished discretion in terms of the use of resources; more and more control mechanisms have been introduced for local government during recent years, and processes of external monitoring and auditing of performance have been established. It is likely that this will have affected morale in more than just the council discussed in this thesis, and may well have impacted on the nature and quality of leadership within local government, as individuals defend their positions, compete for jobs and justify their existence. Guest and Conway (2000, 2001), writing for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), remind us that over the last two decades there have been increasing pressure on the public sector to operate like the private sector, as well as to work within the political framework. Their survey of 2,000 workers (500 of whom worked for local government) provides useful data to support the possible generalizability of this research. Issues of bureaucracy, broken promises, lack of trust, lack of reciprocity, high levels of change and cut-backs in resources (including staff) have all had a negative impact on the psychological contract in the public sector, according to Guest and Conway. Their 2001 study focuses on change; 49% of those surveyed reporting that some form of organisational change had taken place in the previous year, and stating that where large numbers of changes had occurred this tended to have a damaging impact on a range of attitudes, such as motivation and commitment. There are similarities in other local authorities. Certainly in my work as a consultant I have heard comments made by people in local authorities throughout the country which have reminded me of the kinds of feelings expressed by the respondents in this research study. Conversely there are clear differences; each organisation will have its unique history and context.

I suggest that the development of 'thick descriptions' of comparable or 'family' authorities (i.e. those authorities serving a similar sized community, employing a similar number of employees and structured in a similar way). These 'thick descriptions' covering history, context, local issues etc., and then the application of the research to these contexts, would determine 'fittingness', or 'comparability'. The model I have used could well be applied to an analysis of the climate of local government, and the interventions I have suggested could then be used, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the nature and extent of the problem.

All organisations are unique, and there will be contextual issues relating to the council researched in this thesis which do not apply to any other local authority. However, there are obvious similarities to be considered, and so a more broad study of the prevailing climate of local government would be useful, and some consideration given to the appropriateness of 'pattern interrupt' interventions to re-energise the sector.

### **9.10 Final thoughts**

For this council it is imperative that something changes – most particularly for the service users, but also for employees of the council who speak of experiencing despair and desiring change. Repeated patterns of behaviour which serve to maintain the status quo are at best painless in the short term, and at worst fatal for the organisation in the long term.

## **Autobiography in Five Short Chapters**

Portia Nelson, from 'There's a Hole in my Sidewalk'. 1993

### **Chapter 1**

*I walk down the street*

*There is a deep hole in the sidewalk*

*I fall in*

*I am lost... I am helpless.*

*It isn't my fault.*

*It takes forever to find a way out.*

### **Chapter 2**

*I walk down the same street.*

*There is a deep hole in the sidewalk*

*I pretend not to see it.*

*I fall in again.*

*I can't believe I am in this same place.*

*But it isn't my fault.*

*It still takes a long time to get out.*

### **Chapter 3**

*I walk down the same street.*

*There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.*

*I see it is there.*

*I fall in ...it's a habit...but my eyes are open.*

*I know where I am.*

*It is my fault.*

*I get out immediately.*

### **Chapter 4**

*I walk down the same street.*

*There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.*

*I walk round it.*

### **Chapter 5**

*I walk down a different street.*

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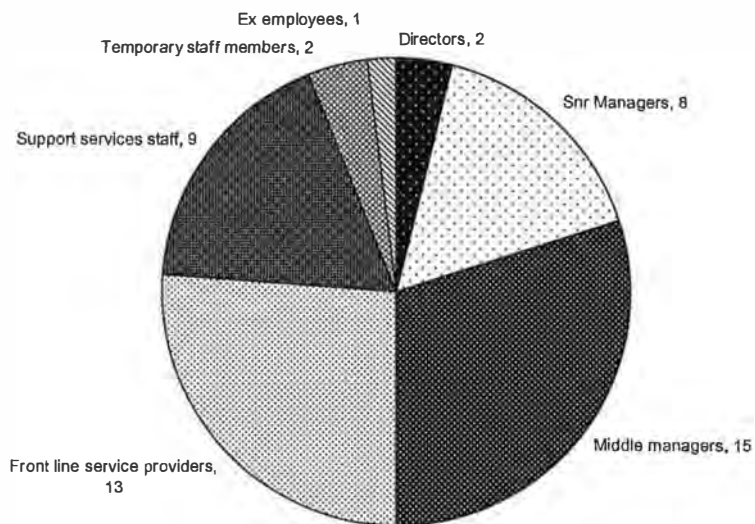
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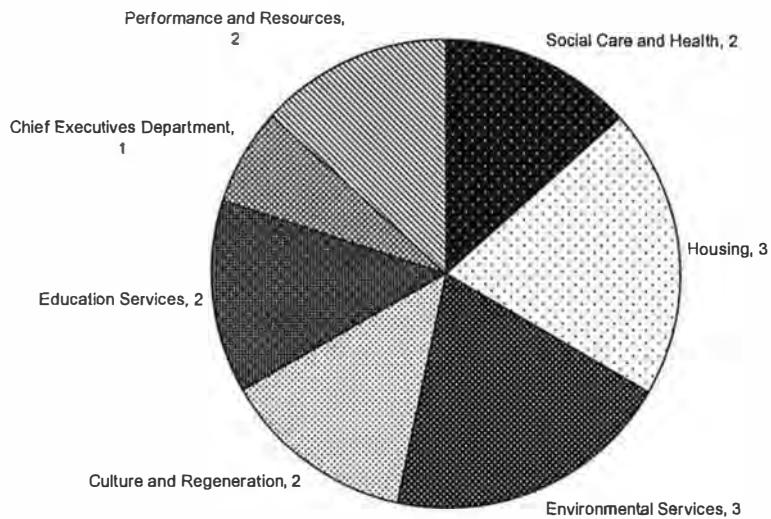
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## Appendix 1 – Breakdown of Sample Group

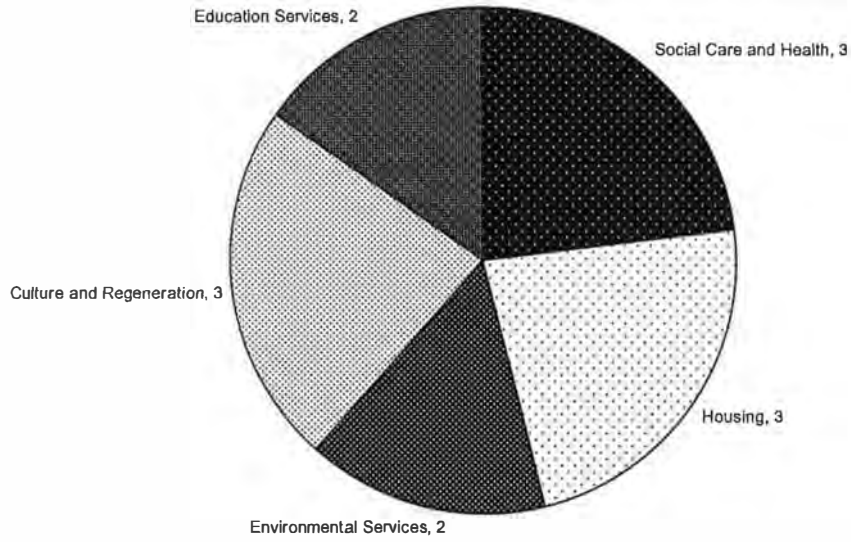
### Overall breakdown of sample group



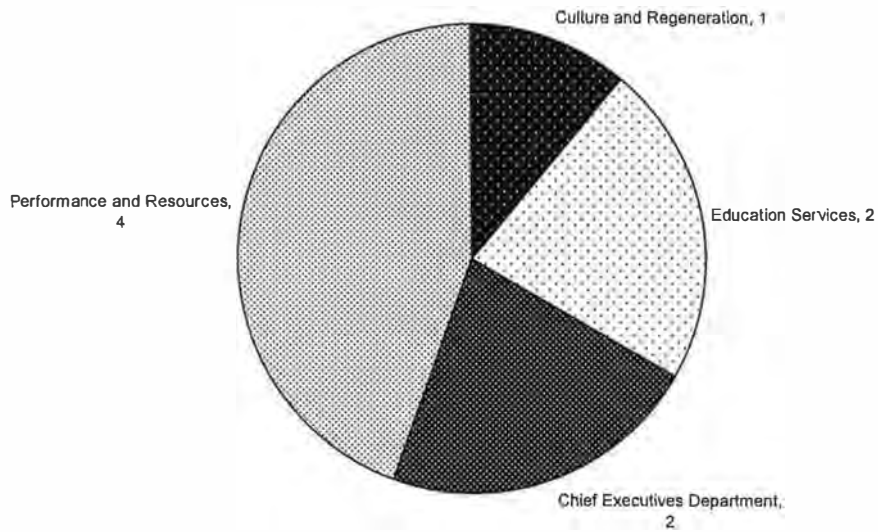
### Middle Managers



### Front line service providers



### Support Services Staff



**Temporary members of staff (i.e. those staff on temporary contracts of employment):**

1 from Performance and Resources Department  
1 from Education Services

**Ex-employees of the council:**

1 who had worked at Assistant Director level

**Gender breakdown**

26 men  
24 women

***Please note – no details are given about which departments the directors and senior managers were working in, because this could identify them***