

“Beginning to recognize and acknowledge Partnership in ourselves and in others, and finding creative alternatives for Dominator thinking and behaviors is a first step towards building a Partnership organization.”

The Partnership Organization

A Systems Approach

By Riane Eisler and Alfonso Montuori

OVER JUST ONE generation, there have been many changes in organizational development, management, and consulting. These changes have not occurred in a vacuum. Along with scientific and technological advances, there are major social, economic, and environmental pressures for change. Different terms have been used to describe this change: from modernity to postmodernity, from the Industrial to the Information age, from the Machine to the Systems age. But there is little question that we are rapidly shifting toward a very different world.

As many business leaders and consultants point out, in this new world, the old stand-bys of order, control, prediction, and clearly defined tasks are less reliable. In the old machine model of industry, beyond simply operating in the assembly line-like reliable machine-like parts, the only demand made of workers was obedience. In the new world, we speak of pro-active, “empowered” workers, “knowledge workers” who add value by being change-agents.

But even as the world around us is changing,

with clear effects on the economy and the workplace, we have to ask ourselves whether we like where it’s going. Is there a vision of what a more desirable world might look like? Can we think about this process differently, so that rather than merely “adapt” to what we think is happening in the world, we can actually co-create it in ways that reflect our values, hopes, and aspirations?

THE PARTNERSHIP/DOMINATOR TEMPLATE

Systems and complexity theory suggest shifting our thinking from focusing on isolated objects to their context, from separate parts to relationships. Then the fundamental questions

become, What is the nature of those relationships? Are they essentially hostile, win-lose, domination-submission? Or are they geared towards mutual benefit, co-evolution, and partnership?

Eisler (1987, 1995, 1997, Eisler & Loye 1998) have addressed these issues by identifying two contrasting models of social systems: the Domina-

tor Model and the Partnership Model. Dominator systems are fear-based, characterized by rigid hierarchies of domination (where power is equated with giving orders that must be obeyed), an ethos of conquest (including the "conquest of nature"), a high degree of institutionalized or built-in violence, male domination, and contempt for "soft" or stereotypically feminine values. Partnership systems are trust-based, and characterized by equalitarianism and "flatter" organization, flexible hierarchies of actualization (where power is guided by values such as caring and caretaking), by a nature-based spirituality, a low degree of violence built into the system, and gender equality and equity.

The old organizational model of the "well-oiled machine" represented the mechanical, clockwork universe that we associate with the Industrial Age. But this mechanical universe was about more than just machines. It was also a universe patterned after the dominator model.

It was a universe in which the men at the top of the organizational hierarchy dominated those below them, men dominated women, fear was the major motivator for workers, and industrial

machines were essentially war machines designed to do "battle" with the competition. Like the foot soldiers of the pre-industrial age, the majority of workers were expected to use their bodies to do whatever they were ordered to do. They were not supposed to think, much less change the orders they received in any way. And there was no place for stereotypically feminine values such as caring and nurturance.

Today, this "command-and-control" model is not only inappropriate; it is becoming increasingly dysfunctional. Bureaucratic rigidity is deadly for organizations that wish to navigate successfully in a rapidly changing environment where innovation and flexibility are key factors. Furthermore, today's citizens of a democratic country cannot (and should not) be treated in

ways that reduce them to being cogs in a machine.

The shift to partnership systems is essential if we are to bring about the changes in organizations and society at large needed for the 21st century. There will inevitably be changes. But unless we address the overarching values and organizational framework, there will be no systemic change in the direction needed. There will continue to be talk about a shift from rigid hierarchies to more flexible heterarchies. But even the flattest organization will still be racked by dominator power games in which individuals vie to "be on top." Unless a viable alternative to the framework of domination can be articulated and applied, there will be no shift towards an alternative mindset and alternative behaviors.

TOWARDS PARTNERSHIP ORGANIZATIONS

Using the conceptual framework of Eisler's cultural transformation theory (Eisler 1987, 1995, 1997, 1998; Eisler & Loye 1998), we can see that much of what is happening today is the conflict between a shift towards partnership systems, countered by dominator resistance. We can also see that much that is today being advocated in the organizational development field is a move toward an overarching partnership model.

1) Flatter, less rigid hierarchical organizations.

As the economic and social environment becomes ever more complex and rapidly changing, the rigid bureaucratic structures of bygone days have become maladaptive. Innovation, flexibility, and individual initiative were inhibited by such structures, which were designed to mass manufacture standardized products that were usually not subject to plentiful competition and did not need to reflect the at times fickle tastes of the public. (In Henry Ford's famous dictum, "They can have any color as long as it's black.") As many management experts have emphasized, what is needed are flatter organizational structure.

However, and this is a critical point about the partnership model that we have repeatedly emphasized in consulting for business and government the change towards flatter organizations

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should not lead us to believe that hierarchy itself is outdated or only found in dominator systems, and that we should now completely abolish hierarchies of any kind. We have to be careful not to engage in oppositional thinking, and immediately reject any concept or practice associated with the dominator system in favor of its exact opposite. As noted earlier, Eisler specifically differentiates between hierarchies of domination, which are driven by the desire to control and oppress, and hierarchies of actualization, which support a greater unfolding of potential.

2) Change in the role of manager, from “the cop” to a facilitator, supportive role.

Whereas in hierarchies of domination the manager’s role is to control subordinates and hand out rewards and punishments on the basis of whether workers perform their explicitly assigned tasks, management consultants today suggest that the role of the manager be more akin to that of a facilitator. The old manager model was clearly based on a military model of the “leader of men,” demanding absolute obedience. But today there is talk of transformational and empowering leadership wherein we expect people to be creative and intelligent, and we treat them as such.

In the partnership model’s hierarchies of actualization rather than domination, the manager’s role is to bring out the best in everyone, to help workers develop their potentials. This requires a willingness to mentor, to be supportive as well as task-oriented – and to learn as well as teach, creating a mutual learning loop. Instead of micro managing every step of the process, in partnership management we can speak of outcome-based management. A manager can explain what the desired outcome is, and support her or his team in achieving that outcome in whatever way works best for them. Teams and individuals can develop new and innovative, or simply efficient and convenient, ways of performing their tasks.

This approach to management makes it possible to function in our rapidly changing world. Even more significantly, it leads to much greater creativity. Moreover, it leads to a reconceptualization of the nature of power, responsibility, and authority.

3) From Power Over to Power To/With.

An important aspect of the partnership model is the reconceptualization of power from Power Over – the power to control and dominate others and our environment – to Power With and Power To; in other words, the capacity to work to achieve goals with others, but not at the expense of others. This is a shift from domination to co-creation, or from coercive power to generative power. Power-over is designed to either work one’s way up the hierarchy of domination or to fend off contenders. It is the single most important contributor to that vast, unspoken shadow that hangs over all organizations: office politics. In a dominator system, most political relationships are viewed in terms of the acquisition of power-over. (Editors note: this sentence seems a bit overstated) In partnership systems, the orientation to “power to” or actualizing power and “power-with” leads to a very different attitude, one that starts off by asking, “how can we best work together to solve problems?”

4) Teamwork.

The dominator organizational structure encouraged isolation of the individual workers. Today teamwork is encouraged, reflecting a shift from isolated workers connected only by an assembly line to interconnected project-teams working on specific functions.

But the current emphasis on teamwork cannot be reconciled with intra-organizational competition between departments, an endemic problem in organizations. If efforts at creating successful teams are not accompanied by a shift from a dominator to a partnership way of relating, most efforts will in fact be doomed.

Working in teams requires great attention to the nature and quality of our relationships as well as a focused task-orientation. Our social system has historically educated men to focus on tasks and socialized women to be much more sensitive to issues of relationship, and to value their importance. In a gender-holistic, partnership organization, both women and men learn to do both, thereby paying the necessary attention to such “intangible,” “non-quantifiable” concerns as feelings, trust, and other stereotypically “feminine” concerns (cf. Moss Kanter, 1993; Rosener, 1995).

5) Diversity

Twenty five years ago, the “manager” and the “worker” were generally portrayed as white males. Today workers and managers are increasingly diverse. Sexual harassment, racism, and discrimination of all kinds are still quite prevalent in our organizations, but they are beginning to be addressed: it is finally OK to speak up about these issues. In short, today’s workplace has seen an increased awareness of, and sensitivity to, issues of diversity.

From a dominator perspective, diversity is a threat to the order. But from a partnership perspective, diversity is an opportunity for greater creativity, for sharing new perspectives, creating new ideas and relationships, and presents possibilities for unusual and generative cross-pollinations. At a more subtle level, the implications of the growing presence of white women and people of color are even more profound. It requires a rethinking of what the real needs, desires, and capacities of workers are.

Nowhere is this more apparent than with the problems faced by women in the workforce, since it is clear that organizations were not designed with them in mind. Flex-work, job-sharing, child-care, and parental leave are some of the results of women’s increased entry into the workforce. But these matters directly impact both men and women. They also directly impact children – and our future. They call for the redesign of organizations to meet human needs – which will in turn also meet the need of providing the high quality capital needed for the postindustrial economy – a capital that is largely shaped from both psychology and neuroscience, by the quality of care children receive.

6) Gender-balance

In partnership systems, there is a holistic and synergistic view of identity. Individuals are not locked into restrictive, stereotypical gender roles, but free to express all their potential. They can experience and express feelings, thoughts and behaviors they deem appropriate, regardless of how they are gender-specifically categorized. While a fundamental characteristic of partnership systems is that they are gender-balanced and holistic, dominator systems polarize and accentuate

socially and historically constructed gender differences, for example, the strong “macho” man, the subservient woman, and place male above female. Women, and the values they represent, are viewed as inferior to males and the values they represent. Indeed, the dominator system creates “oppositional identities”: men are defined in opposition to women, and vice versa.

This distinction is highly significant for organizational development and management. Research shows that individuals who are not trapped in rigid stereotypical gender roles tend to be more flexible and psychologically healthy. They also tend to find it easier to work with others in teams rather than merely assuming positions in rigid rank orderings, to play management roles that are inspiring and facilitating rather than intimidating, and to be innovative and creative.

7) Creativity and entrepreneurship

In the current business environment it is not sufficient to simply adapt: we must innovate and create. Moreover, using a systems/partnership approach, we can begin to redesign organizations, and the role of organizations in society to improve our quality of life.

In dominator systems, there is an ambiguous relationship with creativity: it is viewed a great gift, and at the same time potentially enormously disruptive, a threat to the established order. In partnership systems, creativity is both highly valued and rewarded. While partnership creativity does not exclude dramatic creative changes, it also fosters creative relationships and creative approaches to everyday problems.

Partnership creativity includes social, collaborative creativity, not just something reserved for the occasional lone genius (Montuori & Purser 1995, 1999). We can let go of the idea that creativity only occurs in the rarified domains of the arts and sciences, and apply it where it is perhaps most needed: towards finding alternatives to domination, and the creation of partnership systems.

A systemic, partnership approach to creativity points us beyond an exclusive focus on the “big bang” of product innovation, and towards the ongoing process of “everyday creativity.” This means making creative thinking and behavior a part of our daily lives, and infusing every aspect of

the organization with creativity to foster continuous improvement and quality – new managerial practices, new rewards, new educational processes, new organizational charts, and so forth.. It is a creativity that can also express itself where women have traditionally been allowed most room to develop, in the area of relationships. It can be channeled into overcoming “office politics.” And it can be directed to addressing the challenge outlined above: the “conversion” from domination to partnership, creating new and better systems and a better world.

Systems theorists have shown the importance of viewing the world in terms of systems within systems, and therefore the importance of the context within which any system operates. In dominator business organizations, the social and natural environment have not been considered (Purser, Park, & Montuori 1995). Nature, as well as human being were viewed almost exclusively as resources to be exploited. This has had negative consequences for nature and the vast majority of women, men, and children. But in our time, this dominator way of doing business is not sustainable. Systems thinking – and specifically thinking in terms of partnership systems – is not only necessary for long term business survival, but potentially for human survival (Eisler 1994,1995, 1998; Montuori 1998).

What if organizations were to be designed with systemic, and life-enhancing, partnership principles in mind? This would indeed require a fundamental shift in the way we think about, and design, organizations. Above all, it would require the kind of creativity that is nurtured and supported by the partnership model: the vast and largely untapped reservoir of social creativity and social entrepreneurship.

SOME POINTERS TO PARTNERSHIP IN PRACTICE

Creating a partnership organization requires a deep re-organization of our beliefs about what it means to work together. Challenging assumptions is a key ingredient of the creative process, and the Partnership process is in fact a creative process, a creative challenge to draw on all our resources.

Along with our own and others’ fundamental assumptions, we also explore the very way we think. We have found that Dominator thinking is polarizing thinking. It leads to the kind of thinking that does not allow for possibilities beyond either/or and all/nothing. Polarizing blocks us from exploring possibilities beyond black or white, and prevents us from making creative changes.

Mental Traps

In our experience, most people are eager to embrace the core idea of partnership, and reject the dominator system. But although they may welcome the Partnership principles, they get stuck on basic misconceptions or “myths” about what Partnership really is in practice. For instance, during group exercises in workshops we have heard people say things like, “I could see my group was going around in circles, that we were just spinning our wheels, but I didn’t want to jump in because I didn’t want to be a dominator.” Or, “our group doesn’t have any kind of leader or hierarchy. We do everything by consensus.” This is polarized thinking. It is driven by ALL or NONE and EITHER/OR: EITHER we have a leader, OR we do everything by consensus; ALL hierarchy is bad, therefore we must completely eliminate any form of hierarchy whatsoever; ALL assertive behavior is Dominator behavior. This kind of thinking does not allow the possibility of being assertive without being a Dominator, or of establishing a hierarchy based on priorities, or on appropriateness for a particular task, or on competence. It cuts off creativity.

We invite participants to challenge their own assumptions and explore their thinking not only about the Dominator system, but also about the Partnership system, because as we have seen, sometimes it is hard to see into the real-life implications of Partnership if we’re stuck in a polarizing Dominator logic. Some basic and common misconceptions include:

Myth: Its a dog-eat-dog world, and there’s nothing we can do about.

Reality: The world is what we make it, and human relations are socially constructed. There are many different ways for humans to interact, which, based on Eisler’s template, can be summarized as

either dominator or partnership ways.

Myth: There is no hierarchy in the partnership organization.

Reality: The partnership organization has hierarchies of actualization-based not on force, but on competence, temporal priority, values, and other criteria.

Myth: Partnership is just working together, it means alliances, or collaboration.

Reality: Collaboration occurs in both partnership and dominator systems, but patterned differently in each. Partnership collaboration stresses mutual benefit-and not just to the collaborators, but to those affected by the collaboration (the Nazis collaborated very well, for instance, but not for the benefit of all).

Myth: In partnership everything is done by consensus.

Reality: Doing everything by consensus can lead to more subtle but just as pervasive forms of domination. Partnership requires give and take. Compromise can be creative.

Myth: In partnership there is no conflict, no differences.

Reality: There are always differences and conflicts. But how they are viewed and dealt with are different in a Dominator or Partnership context. In the former conflicts are about eliminating one of the two parties. In the latter, conflict is viewed as a potential source for creativity. It is important to point out that there is no specific recipe for Partnership. As we suggest above, there are guiding principles, but how Partnership manifests is ultimately the result of the individual and collective creativity of the individuals involved. Creating a space for that creativity to manifest-both interpersonally and intra-personally, in the way we think and feel-is the vital step.

Behavioral Patterns

When we ask people to remember their “Best and Worst Workplace Experiences,” the best usually has all the characteristics of a partnership experience, and the worst is more often than not an experience bearing all the hallmarks of a domina-

tor system and behavior. This allows people to see that partnership is something that they have experienced, in some form or other, and makes it more real.

Many people assume that creating partnership organizations requires huge transformations, changes in leadership and massive amounts of “consciousness-raising,” perhaps. This can initially be quite discouraging. No organization will orient completely to the partnership or dominator model. It is always a matter of degree. Our research shows that although it is important to focus on the macro-dimension of organizational change, which we address extensively in our forthcoming book, there is also a micro-dimension, and that this “everyday” world of interactions is not only a crucial place to create partnership, but it is in fact where we live! In other words, the day-to-day interactions at work are exactly what we need to focus on most, because our work life is made up of just that-day-to-day interaction with co-workers, subordinates, clients, and so on. Keeping the macro-picture in mind, including global context, and structural and systemic issues, and remaining aware of the basic difference between the Dominator and Partnership difference while working on micro-activities is a form of thinking globally and acting locally.

In order to show people that partnership can start here and now, we ask people to think about and make a list of a dozen or so small workplace experiences that are examples of partnership versus dominator behaviors. One way to do this is by having people list “random acts of kindness,” and “random acts of unkindness.” These are purposely small and almost insignificant events and behaviors-ranging from a smile to a kind word to being brushed off or treated with subtle disrespect at a meeting. They can be behaviors associated with the example used for Best Workplace Experiences. What were people doing, specifically? Not doing? How were they relating to each other? How did it make you feel?

We encourage people to think about how these kinds of “micro-behaviors” make a huge difference in our day to day experience. Our point is that these behaviors are not random, in one important sense. They either prop up the dominator system, or help create partnership. We also

encourage people to pay more attention to these behaviors in themselves and in others—to acknowledge behavior of others that they find conducive to partnership—and to engage in more themselves.

Most people are very surprised to find the extent to which small behaviors make a big difference. Although the prospect of creating a Partnership organization may appear daunting at first, it's actually easy to make the first step, and to draw on our reservoir of positive experiences to spread more of them around.

The great psychologist Abraham Maslow (1998) used to say that when he would discuss peak experiences with his students, they all spontaneously started having more, simply because they focused their attention on them. This is a very interesting comment, because it suggests that most of the time our minds are simply not open to considering peak experiences, and our attention is focused on that which pulls us away from them. In the same way, through the media focus on violence and certain forms of gossiping and patterns of attention, we tend to focus more on Dominator-like behavior than on recognizing (and reciprocating) Partnership-like behavior. Beginning to recognize and acknowledge Partnership in ourselves and in others, and finding creative alternatives for Dominator thinking and behaviors is a first step towards building a Partnership organization. ■

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