

# 1

## INTRODUCTION: ORGANIZATION AND ORGANIZING

What is an organization? Everyone knows: universities, airlines, chemical plants, supermarkets, government departments. These are all organizations. Some have been around for a long time, employing numerous people across many continents – Microsoft, Shell, McDonald's, Toyota. Others are smaller, locally based – a school, a family-owned restaurant, a small consulting firm, a pottery.

**Organizations** enter our lives in different ways: we **work** for them, we consume their products, we see buildings which house their offices, we read about them in the newspapers and absorb their advertisements. When we look at organizations, especially the larger, older, famous ones, they seem solid, they seem permanent, they seem orderly. This is, after all, why we call them organizations. Images of organizations as solid, permanent, orderly entities run through many textbooks. But, in our view, these books tell only half the story. They obscure the other half: the life and activity that buzzes behind the apparent order. Sometimes this bursts into view, revealing chaos even – such as when computer systems break down, when there is delay or accident on an airline, when products are sent to the wrong destinations or when bookings are made for the wrong dates. They also obscure the immense human efforts and energies that go into keeping organizations more or less orderly.

In this book, our focus is not on 'organization' but 'organizing' – the activities and processes of doing things in organizations. We do not take organization for granted; after all, many large and well-known organizations have faded or died for one reason or another. Instead, we focus on the *processes* of organizing and being organized. We highlight the *activities* which go on in organizations. We look at our **emotions**, the **stories** and gossip which we trade, the deals we strike, the games we play and the **moral** dilemmas we face when in organizations.

Organizations get likened to many things – machines, armies, garbage cans, theatrical plays, the human body, and so on. We find the analogy of a river helpful. Like a river, an organization may appear static and calm if viewed on a map or from a helicopter. But this says little about those who are actually on or in the moving river, whether swimming, drowning or safely ensconced in boats. Our aim in this book is to highlight the experiences of those people who actually know and understand the river well, to present their stories and learn from their adventures. We are hoping that the images

of organization which we generate have more in common with the moving, changing, living river than with the tidy lines of a map.

## WHAT DO YOU KNOW ALREADY ABOUT ORGANIZING?

You probably know far more than you think. If you have been formally employed, you have already peeped behind the organizational screen; felt what it is like to be told what to do or to tell others what to do; to do boring or exciting work; to sink into mundane routine or cope with unexpected crises and problems; to interact with a wide range of people; to daydream; to see inefficiency around you; to try and meet deadlines; to feel stress; to experience elation and excitement; to see how differently different managers do their work; to give and receive help from others ... If you have not had a job, you have been part of organizing in project groups at school, sports meetings, family holidays, Christmas dinners, pub crawls, cinema outings with friends, trips to clubs and so forth. You do not have to have had a **leadership role** in these to be part of organizing, and already to know, through experience, what seems to operate successfully and what seems to fail. Trust these experiences; they are very important. Use them actively as you read this book; build on them with the concepts, stories and studies that we relate to you.

## ORGANIZING – KEEPING THINGS IN ORDER

In this, book organizing is treated as a continuous set of activities. We all have different perceptions of, and tolerances for, disorder – revealed classically in the contrast between a teenager’s view of a ‘tidy’ bedroom and that of his/her parents. In work settings, ‘getting organized’ means different things to different people. Some people seem to operate effectively for years in offices with papers and files strewn all over the place, using their memory as a diary. When challenged about the apparent chaos, they will usually retort that it is fine for them, as long as no one else moves things around.

But not all of us find organizing easy or agreeable. This is how Bill, a manager, described his ‘typical day’:

### REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE

Getting organized is something that I don’t find easy. I have in front of me a book called *Get Yourself Organized* offered by a friend, who was perhaps trying to give me a hint. It looks appealing; it looks sensible. It is written in clear type, with a bold ‘key message’ printed on every other page:

- Decide on your major priorities.
- Put a timescale and deadline on each priority.
- If you can do it today, do it!
- Who do you need to contact to make things happen?

- Interruptions – avoid them!
- At the end of the day, leave your desk clear.

Well, I kept a diary of some of the things that happened to me the other day. Here are some snippets:

It's 7.30 in the morning and I'm driving to work, the loose ends of yesterday still in my head. I've got a 9.30 meeting with the strategy committee and I'm not looking forward to it. I need to get my ideas straight on how we market the new truck, or I know John will screw me and get the cash for his new project ... Mobile rings. It's my secretary, Alice – have I remembered the lunch meeting with Dr Hosikkii from our Japanese subsidiary? I'd totally forgotten about it.

At my desk and a screen full of emails. I'll answer the important-looking ones first. Bill phones; he urgently wants to see me before the 9.30 meeting... He comes in, looks awful. He tells me he needs a few days off because his son's very ill. Of course, he must go home, but how am I going to manage with him away?

I'm ten minutes late for the meeting; I feel embarrassed and the Chief Executive looks disapproving ... It's a tense meeting but I seem to have at least one ally – Jean from Sales. I can trust her, but it's Alan from Production who I can't figure out. Sometimes he's with me, sometimes he's really obstructive. I must take him out for a drink and have a bit of a chat...

The meeting breaks up and I take the opportunity to walk back with the Chief Executive. I explain my lateness and manage to get him to hear my plans for shifting the staff around in my section and the problem of overload. At least he didn't say a new appointment was out of the question...

Back to my office and Alice looks tense. The main computer is down and we need the financial forecasts for the annual report. I phone Helen in Accounts – she's helped me in the past. Meanwhile a call-waiting from Germany on the spec for the new truck. They need to go to press on it this week. I'm really angry with the agency who were supposed to coordinate this. I phone them and lay it on the line. They cost us a small fortune; I'm going to have to look around for a new agency...

A good lunch with Hosikkii; I realize now that I'm going to have to visit him in Tokyo much sooner than I thought. It's an exhausting journey and I can't stay away more than three days. I'm away from my kids yet again...

2.15 pm. The Chief Executive calls me – I've won! Great! Not only will I get what I wanted for marketing the truck, but I can also hire a new assistant. Sometimes I love this job ... I tell Alice to pass the news around. I dash over to Mark's office and congratulate him. He persuaded me in the first place to increase our bid.

I stop at Brenda's desk in the big, open-plan office. 'I know you want something from me', she says, 'that's the only reason you ever visit me'. 'How can you say that!', I reply, sounding offended. She's right, of course. I ask her if she has any advance news on the customer survey we conducted last month. She feigns ignorance, and then slips me a computer print-out from her draw. 'I need this back today, please; it's red hot.'

I find a quiet corner to hide and read the report. Wow! Two of our products have done disastrously. We are going to need a completely revised PR plan. Is that why the Chief Executive's been so accommodating? More work for me?

Alice bleeps me. Says I need to call Eric. I call right away. Never keep your Director waiting. He wants me to stand in for him at an executive meeting tomorrow because 'something's come up'. I dutifully agree; I bet it's the customer survey stuff. But it also means cancelling the appraisal interview I'm doing on Marcus. He'll get even more stressed now. I'll get Alice to make my excuses.

Two more meetings. The first is terminally tedious: a presentation from a consultant on a computer information system. He couldn't sell me a washing machine. Fortunately, I'm interrupted, with a query over the copy on our new trade brochures – are we being sexist? The second was an hour with a research student from a university who was looking at marketing in the automotives sector. She actually had some thought-provoking questions; it's a shame I couldn't give her more time. And it was hardly quality time – my phone rang four times, each time with someone wanting an instant decision or opinion.

4.00 pm already. Grab a coffee. Meet Jane at the machine. Had I heard that Martin was leaving? No, I hadn't. It's rumoured that he's got a plum job in Wales with one of our competitors. 'More re-organization for us', I quipped. The rest of the afternoon I found I couldn't get Martin's leaving out of my head. Maybe that's just what I should do ...

It's 6.15 pm and things, at last, have quietened down. I'll see what's left of the emails and what new messages there are. Oh yes, I must get the agenda for tomorrow's executive meeting, otherwise I'll look a prat. 'Alice, are you still there ...?'

AT THE END OF THE DAY, LEAVE YOUR DESK CLEAR, says the book.

They must be joking!

---

Organizing, in this account, involves tensions, preferences, interruptions, politics, power and personalities. Maybe Bill could have been a better organizer, but his account chimes with what we know about the experienced realities of managing. It is often a whirl of activity; quick switches from one issue to another; gossip and speculation; people dependent on each other; bargaining and compromise; developing contacts and friends; reconciling work pressures with domestic demands; time is always precious. The picture of the cool, **rational** thinker, quietly planning the day, is a myth.

### FRONT STAGE, BACK STAGE

The process of organizing defies tidy, universal, categories. As consumers (customers, students, passengers and so on), we take for granted that things will get done. Lectures, meetings, examinations, happen. Individual and group effort come together to create the hard product – the car, mobile phone, DVD player, pen, paper; or the service – delivering a meal, cutting hair, preaching a sermon, policing a city, running a train. We hardly bother with the organizing processes behind these events. The struggles, **politics**, negotiations, anguish and joys of actual organizing remain, for the most part, invisible to the consumer: they are back stage. When they are inadvertently revealed, showing how precarious organization can be, it can come as something of a shock – as the following tale from of one us reveals:

## REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE

Real Life  
Example

Once I was booking tickets for a family holiday at a local, family-run, travel agent. They were busy, and I queued for a long time. Eventually, I was served by an elderly gentleman who was having difficulty matching the glossy brochure packages with the figures on his computer screen. He got very confused – neither the dates nor the prices seemed to match the published details. The queues behind me were growing ever longer. The staff were getting hopelessly overloaded and stressed. The tension was growing, but, like good British customers, no one in the queue complained. The breaking point came with a loud, sharp, whisper from a younger, female, member of staff to the man who was serving me:

‘For Christ’s sake, give it up, Dad! He only wants a flight reservation; it’s not worth our trouble.’

The man turned on her immediately and retorted, through clenched teeth:

‘How dare you! A customer is a customer; that’s what we’re here for!’

He then proceeded to tell me that ‘they only tolerated him in the shop at weekends now’ and they had their ‘differences of opinion’.

Some of the entrails of the organization had suddenly been revealed. I had seen something I should not have seen, and I was uncomfortable. I did not want to witness a row or receive a confession – I wanted a family holiday! I now mistrusted the service. I could not play my customer role properly if they did not play out their role as ‘travel agents’.

I decided to go elsewhere.

## ORGANIZING AS A MEANING-CREATING PROCESS

When we get close to the experience of people organizing, there is the impression of a lot of personal and interpersonal work going on. In the above exchange, the protagonists were not just observing or responding to each other’s actions; they were also making judgements and creating meanings for themselves.

Seen through the eyes of different individuals, what happened may have seemed very different. Each may have told a different story about what ‘really’ happened. For example:

- the elderly gentleman’s story: ‘customers were happy to queue for personal, caring service’
- his daughter’s: ‘customers were in a hurry, dear old dad all at sea’
- the story-teller’s: ‘customer pressure reveals cracks in the organization’
- other customers’: ‘incompetent travel agents’; ‘rude young people’; ‘poorly organized office’.

The *meaning* of the incident is not obvious. Even the meaning of particular words or sentences may be ambiguous. ‘It’s not worth our trouble’ could be interpreted as a personal insult, or as an expression of frustration with dad – or with customers in general.

'A customer is a customer' could be taken as a brave assertion of good old-fashioned service. But in this case, what about all the customers waiting? Does their inconvenience count for nothing? Alternatively, it may have been a dig at the way young people conducted business, just for the money. We are continuously creating meanings for ourselves; a better understanding of organizing can help improve our understanding of others' meanings.

While most of us in organizations seem to be 'doing a job', listening to someone talking, tapping keyboards, talking into telephones or soldering electronic components, we are also making and exchanging meanings – a fundamental human/social process. Organizing, as we are presenting it in this book, is intimately concerned with the way that people create meaning for themselves, with others, during their working lives. As we interact with others at work, we bring our personal histories and our past experiences with us – finding common ground, compromising, disagreeing, **negotiating**, coercing. This is a vibrant, mobile process, often full of tensions, frustrations and possibilities.

Some portraits of organizations present a bleak picture: the isolation of the individual, lost in an impersonal **bureaucracy**. Some employment is indeed experienced in this way. But this is only part of the picture. People at work also create their own **realities**, an ever-rich **symbolic** life providing a sense of who we are and where we belong. Among other things, this involves swapping rumours, stories, gossip, jokes and laughter. We pick up and contribute to the chat about the organization's heroes, villains and fools. In this way, 'the organization' takes on a special, personal meaning. The organization may then be seen as a caring employer, an impersonal machine, a nest of vipers, a pressure cooker, a castle under siege or any of many different symbolic entities.

## ORGANIZING AS A SOCIAL PROCESS

For much of the time, organizing is a social as well as a personal process, involving groups working together – part of the raw material of meaning-making. This is well illustrated when organizing something from scratch. Imagine yourself as a newly appointed area manager in the sales department of a large publishing organization. You and your four fellow area heads, Sunil, Barbara, Robyn and Nick (each representing different geographical regions) have had some informal discussions and one of the ideas that you came up with was to reward the top performers in the department with a range of awards. You feel that this will provide a boost for morale and enhance the motivation of the salespeople; you want to give it a try before maybe turning it into an annual event. This has been a good year for sales. There is some money in the system and you are confident that your budget can absorb a lively ceremony.

You and your fellow area heads decide to hold a meeting to discuss the ceremony. A host of initial questions arise: what exactly do you want to organize? What is the real purpose of the function? What kind of function is it going to be: 'Serious'? 'Light-hearted'? A mixture of both? What exactly is the budget? What are the possible dates and venues for the event? What events may compete or clash with yours? How are you going to decide whom to award? What awards are you going to offer? It is beginning to look rather complicated – so it is comforting to know that there are others there to help out.

Yet early discussion with your fellow area heads seems to make things worse – more disorganized. They each seem to have different ideas, opinions and interests. Robyn and Nick seem very concerned about the budget – in the past, they have been accused of

wasting money on social events when the organization could ill-afford them. They argue for a modest ceremony on company premises, modest catering (tea and biscuits) and modest awards (music tokens and the like). Sunil, on the other hand, wants 'more style' – an expensive hotel, lavish entertainment, an after-dinner speaker and big prizes: weekend breaks in posh hotels, expensive pieces of electronic gadgetry. He always likes doing things with a flourish and his budget is certainly larger than any of the others. You and Barbara appear to occupy the middle ground. During the discussions, the stress level rises and sometimes the five of you seem to be speaking different languages – and getting quite angry with each other. And this is just about organizing an award ceremony! It is impossible to move forward without making some compromises – and you feel you have made lots. The meeting ends up without a decision.

For a week or so, nothing happens and you are beginning to suspect that the awards ceremony will be yet another good idea that came to nothing. Then, quite by chance, Linda, a management student from the local university, arrives to start a six-month internship in your section. You had quite forgotten about her. Linda seems a very competent and assertive person, she has masses of energy and her laughter is infectious. The idea dawns on you that maybe she is the person who could run the event. This gives you enough impetus to call another meeting of the area heads, re-opening discussion on the awards' ceremony – they seem interested, especially when you offer to 'resource' the planning and organizing of the event with a dynamic new member of your staff.

The second meeting is far more effective. Things are starting to shift. The five area heads are now listening more to each other – maybe they feel that they have already invested enough in the idea of the awards ceremony not to let it stall again; besides, the young intern seems full of energy and ideas which inspire confidence and trust. While few firm decisions are made, a tentative budget is agreed and many positions on many issues draw closer – the venue, the number of awards, the size of the prizes and so on. In the next few days, Linda sets up an email discussion list for the area heads called 'Prize Ideas' which generates some good thoughts – as well as some outrageous ones!

Over the next few weeks, a plan of action was agreed and things started to fall into place. As Linda assumes more and more responsibility for the event, you are happy to delegate decisions to her. She seems to have an eye for detail, keeps meticulous records of decisions and has a knack of anticipating difficulties before they emerge. She is certainly an excellent planner. At crucial moments in the process, she will ask for advice or guidance, and you occasionally consult with your fellow area heads. You have each decided to award the top three performers in your areas and have used a rather rough measure – the size of sales – to decide whom to award. This seems to be fair and equitable. It is Linda, however, who points out that the top performer of one area has generated less revenue than some lesser performers from other areas. After prolonged discussions, all five area managers decide to stick with the original plan, but not to announce publicly during the ceremony the size of each prize-winner's sales. A big difficulty emerges on who should receive the top prize – this becomes a major bone of contention and threatens to derail the entire plan. Each area manager can think of very good reasons why his or her top performer should win the overall prize. Many strange and fanciful ideas are proposed on how to break the deadlock. Eventually, a compromise is reached: there will be no overall winner this year. Instead, each area will have a gold, a silver and a bronze prize winner.

As the key day approaches, up pop the snags. The grand plan has to be re-negotiated several times – usually when someone fails to deliver on what they promised or the

group has neglected an important item. Linda continues to be excellent – gently nagging, independent and persuading. Some people in the office (not you) find her too bossy, too controlling; they get sulky or irritated. But they hang in there nevertheless as the time pressures are enormous and the whole group now wants the event to succeed. **Communication** and coordination are essential – which are often easier said than done.

## ORGANIZING AND IMPROVISING

Things, it seems, rarely go entirely according to plan; even the best laid plans occasionally come to grief. On the day of the event, you face near calamity: the food and wine for the reception fail to be delivered at the agreed time; there is a bus strike in the city; and your after-dinner speaker, a local literary celebrity, informs you by text message that she is stranded by fog at Milan airport and will be unable to attend. Rapidly, you, your fellow area managers and the excellent Linda start making urgent contingency plans. Some of them are a waste of time – the food and wine arrive, if a little late. At the last minute, Linda resolves the after-dinner problem. Her favourite uncle, it turns out, is none other than the former CEO of the country's largest chemical company, someone well-known as the television presenter of a popular programme in which he grills the directors of large multinationals. Sir Eric will be delighted to be the guest of honour at the awards, even if his name does not feature on the official programme.

What have you learned? Successful organizing may depend on a sound plan but **planning** alone is no guarantee of success. Planning ahead provides a needed sense of security and direction, but a rigidly planned event can fail because it does not allow people sufficient opportunity to improvise when things are not working out. When crisis strikes, the group responsible for the organizing may fall apart. Those who had expressed reservations about the plan may say: 'we told you so, you insisted on doing things your way, now you sort out this mess.' Being able to work effectively as a team, thinking on your feet, maintaining your cool and the goodwill of those involved under pressure, are all important in ensuring the success of your project.

There are, of course, individual differences here. Some people are quite happy improvising and managing crises. They can live with uncertainty and chaos, placing their faith in 'muddling through'. They believe that 'it will be alright on the night', and they are frequently proven right – to the intense annoyance of others. These others seek to **control** uncertainty. They are serious, methodical people; they like order, planning, routine and do not generally like 'fooling around'. They mistrust improvisation, chance and spontaneity, but what they really abhor is unpredictability.

## SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

Some of the causes of **success** and failure in organizing are common, no matter what the specific organizing at hand seeks to achieve. Placing excessive reliance on a machine, an animal, a person or the weather, on anything over which you have limited control may undermine your plan. Poor **communication**, inadequate budgets, irreconcilable differences, personality clashes, unanticipated events and low motivation can frustrate any organizing.

However, even if things run smoothly, it does not make an event a success. In fact, success and failure are themselves **meanings** which we attribute to events, meanings which we usually develop as we **talk, joke and gossip** with others. Imagine if, a few days

after the awards ceremony which you organized and which everyone enjoyed, you come under criticism from the head of your sales department for 'mispending the department's money on extravagant functions, like that farce of a drunken party organized recently'. Imagine too if rumours start to reach you of salespeople who grumble about the awards, claiming that they all went to the 'yes men' in the department, those same ones with the cosy routes and easy sales.

You may be surprised at such a development. Instead of receiving thanks for organizing what seemed a much enjoyed event, you come in for criticism. This may be one of the best lessons that the example teaches us: just when we think that we are free to organize others, we may ourselves be part of someone else's organizing activities. Your event may have been a success in terms of your objectives and values, but a resounding failure in terms of theirs – and they have the power to make their judgement stick.

Under such circumstances, it may be helpful to present to the departmental head some arguments and evidence, showing that most of those participating in the function found the event not just enjoyable but also extremely useful, that morale has soared since the event and that sales have taken off. This type of evaluation and assessment is itself an important aspect of organizing. Would you do things differently, if you were organizing the same function all over again? Are there any short cuts that you have learned? Might you have opted for a different event? Would you like to work with the same people again?

Some major events are organized on a one-off basis, as in the example above. A military campaign, the staging of the Olympic Games, a business take-over, a wedding – such events seem to call for their own unique organization. Most events, however, are not organized like this. They are part of ongoing processes of organizing. Admitting a new class of undergraduates to a degree, preparing a company's accounts, taking in new stock, recruiting new staff, purchasing new equipment, and many other activities, are like painting the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco: by the time you have finished, it is time to start all over again. The awards ceremony may itself become an annual event – with new experience, the earlier mistakes are avoided, the difficulties are ironed out and the ceremony becomes a ritual about which people grumble, gossip and joke, but which they ultimately respect and value.

## ORGANIZING AND MANAGING

Most organizations designate certain types of employees as managers. This is an important part of their *identity*, something that differentiates them from mere foremen, supervisors, clerks or workers. Yet, the example suggests that managing is not something that only designated managers do. Everyone involved in a collective project is involved in managing – managing budgets, managing information, managing timetables and so forth. Managing his boss's diary can be a consuming activity for a personal assistant, someone *not* designated as a manager. The personal assistant may also have to manage his boss's moods, his public appearances and even his family crises.

## IN CONCLUSION

We have argued for a shift from the notion of organization to organizing. Organizing is to be seen as a social, meaning-making process where order and disorder are in constant tension with one another, and where unpredictability is shaped and 'managed'. The raw



of sense-making as a dimension to all organizing was demonstrated by Weick (Weick, 1979), while Fineman (2006b) has explored the emotions of organizing. Czarniawska (1999) is one of many theorists who have highlighted the importance of language for all organizing, while Gabriel (2008b) has provided a systematic account of 240 keywords that help us organize our thinking and our actions.

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Reflect on the organizing that you undertook before joining the academic programme that you are currently engaged in. What organizing was necessary before you could join the course? Who helped you? What technology helped you in your organizing? Were there any times when you had to rely on improvising?
2. What exactly is meant by 'sense-making'? How do you make sense of the following events:
  - (a) your manager offers promotion to one of your junior colleagues, who will become senior to you
  - (b) your employer announces a merger with one of your organization's main competitors
  - (c) your academic performance has taken a sudden change for the worse; having become accustomed to getting high marks, you now find yourself consistently earning middle and low marks.



### Reading On

Currie, G. and Brown, A.D. (2003) 'A narratological approach to understanding processes of organizing in a UK hospital', *Human Relations*, 56(5): 563–586.

This article outlines a narratological approach to understanding how middle managers and senior managers in an NHS hospital made sense of the introduction of a series of interventions led by senior managers, illustrating the role of individual and group narratives in processes of collective sensemaking.

Gherardi, S. (1999) 'Learning as problem-driven or learning in the face of mystery?', *Organizational Studies*, 20(1): 101–23.

This paper explores, from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, the implicit assumptions underlying the Organizational Learning literature, and looks for alternative ways of conceptualizing learning-working-innovating as non-distinct activities. The term 'learning-in-organizing' is proposed as a replacement for 'organizational learning', so that its distributed and provisional nature can be considered when interpreted as a practical accomplishment.

Hatch, M.J. (1999) 'Exploring the empty spaces of organizing: How improvisational jazz helps redescribe organizational structure', *Organizational Studies*, 20(1): 75–100.

This paper uses jazz as a metaphoric vehicle for redescribing the concept of organizational structure in ways that fit within the emerging vocabulary of organization studies. It begins with a description of some basic elements of jazz performance – soloing, comping, trading fours, listening and responding, groove and feel – and builds on these to redescribe organizational structure as ambiguous, emotional and temporal.

Vince, R. (2002) 'Organizing reflection', *Management Learning*, 33(1): 63–78.

This article considers what is involved in the practice of reflection for organizational learning and change, with emphasis on reflection as an organizing process rather than on the individual, 'reflective practitioner'. The author describes a way of 'organizing reflection' that can create and sustain opportunities for organizational learning, exploring some of the literature on reflection and describing four reflective practices. Collectively, these four reflective practices constitute an approach to reflection that represents one way of organizing for learning and change.