CHAPTER 20

Stress and Effectiveness: An Approach for Changing Organizational Culture1

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The chapter gives an overview of sources of stress and ineffectiveness in work and the work environment. Several underlying factors are discussed. Apart from change in itself, these factors involve a surplus or a shortage of the following characteristics: degree of task challenge, as well as orderliness, social embedding, and compatibility of values and goals. We then describe an approach of organizational culture change, which uses the occurrence of stress reactions as signals to indicate where the organizational culture is less than effective. Once employees have identified the main problems in this way, workshops can be set up to enhance the effectiveness of their work as well as their well-being.

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20.1 INTRODUCTION: ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE, EVERYDAY REALITY AND STRESS

The concept of organizational culture is hard to define. This difficulty stems from the wide and diverse use of the term organizational culture, as well as from the fact that most of organizational culture does not meet the eye. However, following the logic of the biblical saying that a tree is known by its fruits, one can say that organizational culture produces the everyday reality of an organization. This everyday reality, at least in principle, is open for inspection. Everyday reality refers to how things are in the organization, and what its stakeholders do and experience. Everyday reality not only entails the recurring forms of the organizational members’ routines, but also includes matters such as the housing and lay-out of the organization and the common reality stemming from that housing and lay-out, with its blueprints for behaviour, perception, thought and feeling. When employees are unable and/or unwilling to fit their behaviour into the relevant formats provided by the culture, their behaviour becomes less effective, while they also experience stress and alienation. This makes everyday reality a logical point of application for interventions aiming at the optimization of organizational well-being.

Though the actual forms of everyday reality may have come about in somewhat coincidental ways, the result is a highly predictable way of doing. Everyday reality turns out to be a solid reality, which one shares with all involved and in which the organization’s members can firmly believe (Schabracq, 1991, 2007). Other possible approaches don’t develop, simply because the original approaches were good enough – at least, they apparently did not generate insurmountable difficulties – and, as it is, something can take only one form at a time. The organization’s members just keep on enacting the everyday reality’s forms, as if their routines represent the only possible way to do things, making the everyday reality even more solid in the process. Such a developmental process is called ‘autopoiesis’ (Maturana & Varela, 1980), its result a self-organizing system (De Bono, 1990).

The forms that make out everyday reality are open to inspection, even though usually nobody inspects them extensively. As long as these forms are properly displayed, the organizational members hardly pay conscious attention to them. Though the forms are experienced as self-evident parts of reality, they provide all involved with a multitude of cues, signalling:

- which ‘piece’ or ‘play’ they are playing;
- the roles in the play which all players are enacting;
- where they are in the play, i.e. the relevant scene and lines.
These cues enable others to display the appropriate complementary behaviour, which in its turn provides cues for the next lines of the other actors. In this way one’s posture and movements serve as proposals to enact a certain situation and its inherent relations (Schabracq, 1991), even though the posture and movements are hardly perceived as such. They are just automatically being acted upon.

Everyday reality essentially consists of non-problematic routines, habitual ways to respond to the permanent or recurrent demands resulting from fulfilling the functions of organizational culture. So, organizational culture is about recurrent solutions for recurrent problems (Schabracq, 2007). People continuously re-enact, reconstruct, recognize, represent and recite the forms and meanings of culture (Moscovici, 1984), and abstain from other possibilities. Most of the endless repetition of all this activity stays out of awareness. Though essentially a never-ending Sisyphus labour, we just do it with a calm fanaticism: we sustain the discipline to not pay attention to other possibilities and ignore our not paying attention to these other possibilities. In this way we create a reality that provides stability and continuity, as well as normality and perceived safety. To the degree that enacting this everyday reality is effective at our work, we can lose ourselves in our tasks, without being needlessly distracted and disturbed, blissfully ignoring all the effort involved. As a result, everybody knows what to do, what to attend to and whom to involve in it. If this self-evident everyday reality is not realized, the functionality of the organization and the effectiveness of its members break down, and stress and alienation ensue. This breakdown, which results in stress and alienation, can be a matter of the characteristics inherent in that reality, but it can also be a consequence of changes in the organization and the work.

Of course, stress and alienation are undesirable, but they also have an important positive function: they serve as signals, as they clearly indicate that something is wrong (Schabracq & Cooper, 2001): the organizational culture apparently does not provide a proper solution here anymore and chances are that the effects of this go beyond the mere stress and alienation phenomena.

The everyday reality can be divided in four domains:

- the challenge inherent in the work itself;
- the orderliness of the work environment;
- the social embedding of the work; and
- the fit between the values and goals of individual employees and those of the organization.
In each of these domains, disturbances can arise, which can be described as a surplus or shortage of what in itself is a good thing. These disturbances result in a situation in which the individual must do something that he cannot do, or does not want to do. This then results in a loss of control and effectiveness, as well as in stress and alienation (Schabracq & Cooper, 2003). The middle regions on the other hand go together with a feeling of safety and self-evidence, the feeling of living in a manageable, comprehensible and meaningful reality (Antonovsky, 1987). In organizations and work, the ‘middle regions’ – the exact nature of which of course varies per individual – allow for functionality. We return later to the sources of stress brought about by the surpluses and shortages of these domains, but first we examine the impact of change in organizations.

20.2 EVERYDAY WORK: STABILITY AND CHANGE

Everyday work, like every form of reality, depends on the attention we pay to that work. When we focus our attention on something else, the reality of the work dissolves and no longer determines our actions, which diminishes the effectiveness of our work. The easiest and best way to keep on focusing our attention on our work is to let the work engage us as if by itself, so that we do not need to force ourselves. To engage us in such a way, the work needs certain characteristics, while at the same time the work environment should not provide too much in the way of diversion that will needlessly demand our attention. As far as these conditions are met, the working reality is effective. We experience functioning in an effective work reality as self-evident, accompanied by a sense of trust and control. Though maybe we hardly experience these feelings as such, we usually do experience their absence, though we can adapt to their absence in the second stage of stress (Schabracq, 2003).

The reality of our everyday work life provides us with important outcomes, which turn that reality into quite an addictive comfort zone. We have also invested a lot in bringing about and keeping up this reality: it took much effort to acquire the necessary skills; it demanded, and still demands, a lot of highly repetitive work, and a strict discipline of our attention. As a result, we tend to perceive this comfort zone as a self-evident part of our identity. Consequentially, we perceive outside pressure to change these adaptations as an infraction, which may cause all kinds of stress reactions. Such pressure may for instance evoke all sorts of unpleasant emotions, which we prefer not to feel. Moreover, we know our present outcomes, but have no idea what the future will bring us. So we tend to fight off such infractions, which is often
denominated by the antagonists of the change as ‘resistance to change’, which by its association with the psychoanalytical concept of ‘resistance’ actually implies a disqualification of the response as being unconscious and irrational.

Though we experience this comfort zone as a part of ourselves, it is a part of organizational culture as well: we share the concerns evoked by impending change with many of our colleagues. These shared concerns, and the emotions they trigger, tend to turn our attempts to hold on to our comfort zones into a collective enterprise: it feels only logical to support each other in this respect. The mutual support can make the collective resistance to fight off change surprisingly effective and well coordinated. This resistance can also arise when it concerns changes for the better, that is, as seen from an outside perspective. This collectively fighting off change is far from surprising. When we define culture as a repertory of standard solutions to standard problems, it is only logical that it strives for stability and continuity. Only as far as an organizational culture accomplishes this objective, can it provide reality and normality to its members.

Though it is only natural for organizational cultures, and their members, to fight change, this resistance can become a deadly course when it interferes with their adaptation to changes in the outside environment. As it is, the change in the environment has increased in an unprecedented way and is still increasing at an accelerating pace. As a result, many companies must adapt to their changing environment as well as they can, which often boils down to radical changes in employees’ everyday reality. Adapting to these changes requires new skills and knowledge from them. Though this kind of change does not occur in the same degree in all organizations, everywhere more employees than ever are confronted with changes that they did not ask for.

All these changes must be integrated in our everyday reality in a manageable way. One can – with some right – state that such an adaptation is a sheer perversion of our organizational cultures, as it is the main objective of an organizational culture to provide standard solutions to standard problems. Though such a statement may feel justified, it is not particularly helpful in adapting to these changes. Still, if adapting implies changes in our work, it will diminish the effectiveness of our functioning for some time and may lead to stress and alienation. Too much change in too little time then does threaten the effectiveness of our functioning. Examples of such changes are all kinds of reorganizations, new policies, changes in tasks and task demands, mergers and new managers, as well as new technology, computer systems and software. All of these changes can give rise to severe stress reactions and disturbances of effectiveness.
20.3 THE WORK ITSELF

Effective work is a matter of the challenge demanded by the work: the challenge should be neither too little nor too much, as effective functioning only takes place in the ‘middle region’.\(^4\) Something similar applies to an effective work environment. Here such ‘right’ middle regions play a role as well, though now several variables are involved. Here too, ‘too much’ or ‘too little’ of such a variable implies a lower level of effectiveness. Taking ‘task challenge’ as an example, it is obvious that we can’t perform a task that is too challenging, i.e. too difficult, too extensive, etc. On the other hand, a task that challenges us too little causes problems in the longer run also: we get bored, our attention is diverted, etc. However, the right degree of challenge, the ‘middle region’ – the nature of which of course varies per individual – enables us to function effectively. We can consider this middle region as an illustration of a very old and widespread ethical concept, namely ‘the narrow path of virtue’ or ‘the golden mean’, a central concept in the thinking of Aristotle and Christian medieval philosophy, as well as in classical Chinese philosophy.

The work is organized functionally and effectively to the degree that we can keep our attention on the work. Put differently: the work must be challenging enough, while at the same time we must be able to handle the challenge.

20.3.1 Work that Implies Insufficient Challenge

When work does not challenge us sufficiently to hold our attention while we still must do that work, we must turn to another kind of attention: we force ourselves to keep our mind on our work. Such a forced form of attention soon becomes very tiring. We can only go on in such a way for a limited period of time. Then attention is diverted, we can become strangely sleepy, and it becomes difficult to do the work. Social contacts often play a crucial part here in keeping us somewhat focused and effective anyhow. Moreover, unchallenging tasks often have to be done in large quantities, and at a fast pace. As a result, these tasks also can be too challenging at the same time as well. Several causes of insufficient challenge are discussed here.

- **Too few activities to fill the time and lack of demands.** Having insufficient activities to fill the time in a work situation, while not being

\(^4\) Checklists for surpluses and shortages of challenge inherent in the work, as well of the following domains, are to be found in Schabracq (2007).
allowed to leave either, is for many people very unpleasant. Too little to do is the stuff where imprisonment is made of. The same goes for too slow a work pace and a lack of demands. In the longer run, we become drowsy, get bored and have difficulty concentrating on the little work we must do. We become less effective, and chances are that we make more mistakes.

- **Work with insufficient meaning.** Work without much meaning appeals insufficiently to our talents and motives. As a result, it is hard to keep our mind on the tasks’ execution, which makes us ineffective. Insufficient meaning can be a matter of very little variation, and much short-cycled repetition. A good example is working at a conveyor belt. Often such tasks are quite easy, which is not good for concentration either. The lack of meaning can also stem from the remoteness of the task’s contribution to the final product.

- **Too little decision latitude.** Some tasks are so overly regulated that everything – breaks, the sequence of partial tasks, work pace, and so on – is fixed. This lack of freedom occurs for example at counters or call centers, or when our work links us up to some machine or assembly line we cannot influence. Often such work is strictly supervised as well, with or without the help of electronic devices. Strict supervision can also interfere with the social contact during the work.

- **Very formalized work.** In some organizations, the way tasks are performed is more important than the results and outcomes. The task then turns into painstakingly sticking to time-consuming formal procedures, checks and double checks, a ritual way of working, without paying attention to, or even disdaining, outcomes and results. The task itself may even become empty and devoid of meaning. More of this is described in Section 20.4.2.

### 20.3.2 Tasks that Imply too Much Challenge

Work can also demand a level of challenge that is too far beyond our competence. We then start to make mistakes, and are unable to deal with the task in a systematic way, or to survey things properly. We experience mental chaos, and task performance breaks down. The following issues can play a part:

- **Too many things to do in too little time.** Doing things at high speed can be pleasurable, as long as everything goes well. We can surprise ourselves, be proud of ourselves, and enjoy relaxing afterwards. It becomes a different story when things do not go well, for example when we cannot concentrate, are angry about the way in which the work was allocated to us, are tired,
or feel that we are not doing well. In general, deadlines should not be too limiting, nor too numerous.

- **Tasks that are too difficult.** Difficult tasks can have similar effects as too little time. A different scenario ensues, however, when the work is much too difficult, for example due to a lack of necessary experience or training. We then block ourselves completely or task performance becomes chaotic. Attempts to repair mistakes take a lot of time, and are not always successful. We can try to work around the problems, to get some of the work done anyhow, if that is at all possible.

- **Serious consequences.** The challenge presented by a task becomes greater to the degree that the consequences of doing it wrong become more serious, for example when we must take a decision that has serious consequences for different parties. Sometimes we do not even have all the necessary information to make the best decision. Still, we do not want others to suffer needlessly from this, and want to do everything correctly, which is impossible. Because organizations have become flatter, and more responsibility has been pushed down to the work floor, people who were used to doing what the boss said, now have to take such decisions themselves. For these people, having to take such decisions can make their work more challenging than they like it to be.

- **Ambiguities.** In many jobs, we must do well, without knowing what exactly is expected of us. When we are bothered by this, it is much harder to carry out the task effectively. Ambiguity can take many forms. Sometimes the goals of the task are unclear: ‘I more or less manage things around here’. Sometimes, it is the way in which the goals must be attained: ‘How you do it, doesn’t interest me much. I don’t even want to know, as long as you do it’. Sometimes also, it is a matter of insufficient feedback: ‘Did it work out?’ ‘We’ll know more in five years’. Other issues that can affect our effectiveness are a lack of clarity of responsibilities (‘I think you should take this up with Peterson’. ‘No, I must have you’), appointments (‘I told you it would be soon’), criteria for performances and quality (‘You meant something like this?’), and so on.

- **Too many divergent responsibilities.** When a job implies too many divergent responsibilities, the result may be a decrease in effectiveness too. Such a job demands from us that we mentally change gear a lot, concerning both problems and people, do very different things, and keep many loose ends in our heads. Moreover, we never are ready, as each time, as if by itself, the next responsibility emerges, so that we cannot really relax and recover. Furthermore, the different responsibilities may interfere with each other from time to time, for example when the timely completion of the one makes the timely completion of the other impossible, and vice versa (a familiar problem for many secretaries).
• **Incompatible responsibilities.** A special case of divergent responsibilities is role conflict, or incompatible responsibilities. A familiar example is the position of the lower manager. Pleasing his superior by increasing production may evoke a conflict with his employees. This conflict is not only a matter of his employees not wanting to work harder, but they also may see him as the advocate of their interests. However, when our poor lower manager takes on that role, he risks a conflict with his management. Though a performance that is fully satisfactory to both parties will remain problematic, he has still been hired to do as good a job as he can.

20.4 **THE WORK ENVIRONMENT: ORDERLINESS**

Orderliness of the work environment has a physical component, as well as a behavioural or procedural one. Both components have to be ‘in order’, that is, both should be arranged in a way that makes them effective, i.e. contributing to the goal attainment inherent in our work. To that end, the environment should be relatively free of irrelevant elements that demand attention, and interfere with task performance. Being ‘in order’ implies also that the work environment should be relatively constant and stable, so that we can become fully familiar with it, and optimally attune to it. Of course, the individual differences in what comprises optimal orderliness are big.

The physical component of orderliness of our work environment involves its architecture and interior design, as well as the furniture, machinery and other equipment. Preferably, all gear is accessible and in the right places, ideally in a way that meets the priorities inherent in the task, so that at all times we can easily do what needs to be done, also when something goes wrong. When something breaks down, it should be repaired or replaced, so that all equipment is in a working condition. In addition, all gear must be well maintained and clean. Maintenance and cleaning imply that we actively and habitually have to reinstitute the order of the work environment: this order has to be ‘reconstructed’ and tidied, time after time.

Physical orderliness is often accentuated by emphasizing and marking distinctions and relations (Ashcraft & Scheflen, 1976; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1982). An example is grouping objects that belong together. Moreover, we can mark objects that belong together by giving them a common background, colour or label, or by enclosing them in some frame that functions as a visual border. We can also provide kindred objects with another marker such as a text, lines, thresholds, arrows, pictograms, special materials, special lettering and so on. With the help of these artefacts, we can highlight borders and points that need our special attention.
This kind of orderliness provides us with clear ‘set points’ of what is normal (Frijda, 1986), and facilitates the automatic intermittent scanning of the task environment for possible intrusions and disturbances. Intrusions and disturbances simply stand out more in this way. This effect is probably also one of the reasons why tidying and cleaning can have a pleasant centring effect: once finished, we have apparently tamed all irregularities and disturbances.

Such a stylized display of orderliness suggests that our environment is ruled by a plan that takes care of everything: apparently, everything goes as it is meant to go, for things are not in this kind of order by themselves. Such a display suggests the kind of control that excludes surprises. Some organizations even go further, and have designed everything in their own specific company style, in their ‘own’ colours, and with their own logo on all kinds of objects. Here too the message is clear: everything goes as it is meant to go, and we are on top of things.

As an orderly work environment draws no special attention, we hardly notice it. We can thus ‘blindly’ proceed with our tasks. Though every working environment needs some orderliness, it is logical to assume that especially difficult and complex tasks, as well as tasks with many unpredictable elements, profit most from an orderly and stable environment, because these tasks need more of our undivided attention.

Also, the physical lay-out must provide good physical work conditions, in the sense of lighting, sound, temperature, sitting comfort, effort in using the equipment, air quality and so on.

The relation between the physical environment and our habitual behaviour is of a dialectical nature: how we design our environment and how we behave mutually determine each other. So the way our workplace is designed very much determines how we walk, where we sit, as well as what we see, hear and feel there. The other way around, we design and furniture our workplace in a way that accommodates our preferred routines. We manufacture normality and everydayness in our life by continuously repeating ourselves, and by a strict discipline of attention (Schabracq, 2007). As we repeat ourselves in a remarkably strict, more or less ritualized way, our habitual behaviour becomes an all-important source of orderliness to ourselves, as well as to others.

20.4.1 Too Little Orderliness

Too little orderliness may seriously hamper our effectiveness, for example when several issues fight for our attention, making it impossible to attend to a single issue long enough to deal with it properly. Also too little orderliness can lead to all kinds of loose ends in our head, lines of action that just stop
somewhere, and ambiguous, inconsistent and even downright conflicting cues for action, while things around us go wrong, are changed, still do not work and are changed again. Some people just love such a chaos, and are very good at it. To others, work degenerates into an endless succession of daily hassles (Kanner et al., 1981), which destroy their effectiveness.

Too little orderliness can be found in all kinds of professional firms, stock exchanges, dealer rooms of merchant banks and in the media (TV studios and editorial offices of journals). Too little orderliness is often caused by change, for example in times of (successive) reorganizations and mergers, when the old rules are no longer applicable, while new ones still have to be developed. Moreover, in such cases there are all kinds of rumours about changes of jobs and departments, early retirements and lay-off, which easily usurp our attention. Too little orderliness may have diverse causes, which can reinforce each other also. We discuss some examples:

- **Dysfunctional work conditions.** If a work environment does not have appropriate lighting, temperature, auditory and olfactory conditions, as well as proper furniture and gear to do the job properly, it interferes with the proper division of attention for the tasks, which can disturb effective functioning. Such an environment signals that the organization is not ‘in order’, and does not care much for its employees. Something similar happens when we are annoyed by the dirtiness or disarray of our work environment.

- **Broken or ill-functioning tools and apparatus.** When a tool or apparatus that we need for our work does not function well, we can’t go on with our task as planned, as long as it is not mended. This cannot only ruin our mood, but it obviously disrupts the effectiveness of our functioning as well.

- **Flexible workplace.** In order to make optimal use of the available workstations in offices where employees are only part-time present, some organizations use flexible workplaces. Apart from the fact that working at different workstations in itself can interfere with orderliness, not all places are equally appealing to everybody. Also it happens sometimes that all stations are occupied. All of this may interfere with effective functioning.

- **Flexible working hours.** Flexible working hours can interfere with orderliness and effectiveness of our work in several ways. Apart from the interference with our daily rhythm, which influences our activation and alertness, flexible working hours can make it impossible to reach colleagues and staff we need to speak to do our job properly. Moreover, flexible working hours interfere with family life, and periodic leisure activities and pastimes. All of this becomes worse when the daily work is divided in parts with ‘free’ periods in between.
• **Being a member of a ‘pool’**. Some organizations place support staff, such as secretaries, in a ‘pool’, to let them work for different people in different departments. This arrangement prevents them from acquiring any thorough knowledge about the tasks of each of these employees and departments. Installing such a pool leads to an undesirable annihilation of useful knowledge as well. Working in a pool can even mean that secretaries work every day for somebody else, without much possibility to properly finish a somewhat extended assignment. Working in a pool also prevents support staff from building appropriate relations with the people they work for. As a result, they only do the simplest of tasks for different employees, time after time, not using and developing their skills.

• **A starting or fast-growing organization.** In a starting organization, it is not unusual that everybody does everything. The same occurs in rapidly growing organizations. In both cases there is a lack of structure, standard procedures and specialized well-trained employees. As a result, everybody is terribly busy reinventing the wheel, while the speed at which the work is done is far from impressive.

• **High sick leave, turnover, or many temporary employees**. In an organization with high levels of sick leave, turnover or a high proportion of employees on temporary contracts, the employees with longer tenure are often exclusively busy filling holes, and putting out the most acute fires. In addition they have to break in new people, and hardly have time left to do their own work. Moreover, many of the newly trained employees leave after a short time, which makes the efforts of breaking them in rather meaningless. All these activities can have a cumulative adverse effect. Moreover, in an organization with high sick leave and turnover, more things tend to go wrong, as high sick leave and turnover can be considered as a case of choosing with one’s feet.

### 20.4.2 Too Much Emphasis on Orderliness

When maintaining orderliness demands too much attention and turns into a goal in itself, it obscures the original goal, namely getting the actual task done. Sticking to time-consuming orderly procedures, with their checks and double checks, leads also to a severe limitation of what we are allowed to do. As a result, it interferes with the work effectiveness and efficiency, which manifests itself, for example, in problems of internal and external communication, ‘political’ relationships, slow decision making and stagnation of projects. These problems present themselves as unchangeable data, ruled by relentless and indifferent natural laws. To actually get something done can become next to impossible: too many rules, too many people who have to
approve first, too long communication lines. This formalization may make it very hard to keep our attention focused on the task. This kind of orderliness occurs frequently in bureaucratic organizations, such as ministries and other public and semi-public organizations, but also in multinational companies and other organizations with a rigid hierarchy, such as military and paramilitary organizations, and some churches. The causes are obvious: too many rules and too strict a hierarchy with very precisely delineated communication lines and responsibilities.

People working in such organizations develop a good eye for rank, status symbols, movements up and down, and their possibilities and dangers. There is much political jargon, of a somewhat legalistic nature, some difficult words and little concrete content. This is also the language use of a permanent conspiracy, with its inherent suspicion and fear of outsiders. When outsiders ask an employee of such a bureaucratic organization – with whom they further relate quite well – a factual question about his work, the outsider often experiences a kind of ‘praecox Gefühl’, the feeling that it suddenly is impossible to make contact. This pre-war term was used as indication that the other person was suffering from ‘dementia praecox’, or schizophrenia, as it is now called (Grube, 2006).

At the individual level, too much orderliness leads to hiding of emotions and denial of problems. Too much orderliness is characterized by a ritual way of working, just going through the moves, following conventions, disapproving ostentatiously of deviations, without paying much attention to – or even disdaining – outcomes and results. Moreover, many colleagues are bored, and will not take any risks, afraid as they are to make a bad impression. Still they want everything to go their way, and such a system offers definite possibilities for this. Many people, however, eventually cannot stand such a way of working. They complain about high work load, and many suffer from alienation and aversive emotions. Because deviant moods and activation states are contagious (Schabracq, 1991), this may have a serious paralyzing effect.

20.5 THE WORK ENVIRONMENT: SOCIAL EMBEDDING

Work implies social relationships, that is, the relatively stable ways in which specific persons relate to each other. The forms of relations are of course determined by their history, but standardized cultural units and formats are used for their construction, while their development follows culturally determined scenarios. Within a relation we know more or less what the other party expects us to do, and to attend to, as well as what we may expect from him. As a result, relations are important in bringing about repetitiveness and
stability into our work environment, which in its turn contributes to the work environment’s orderliness.

First, there are the relations with the people with whom we relate regularly. These people form our social network. A good network is big enough, extends over different organizational levels and departments, and includes people from outside the organization, such as clients, suppliers, government representatives and fellow professionals. The network consists mostly of persons we more or less trust and like. The main outcome of a network consists of making everyday business manageable. As the interactions in most relations are often highly repetitive in character, such relations give us an opportunity to display a familiar repertoire of activity in those relations, in principle to make them as effective and pleasurable as possible. The development of and care for a network takes time and effort: to be optimally effective, relations need history.

As working together means sharing experiences, an important outcome of a social network is the opportunity for pleasant and meaningful contacts. Moreover, because we are in the same line of work, chances are that we have similar interests and hobbies, and even that we are of a likeminded nature, both conditions for getting along well. As a result, some relations grow into personal and even intimate ones (Hall, 1969). We find protectors, as well as favourite subordinates, colleagues and people elsewhere, with whom it is pleasurable to interact. No wonder that, when we lose or quit our job, the loss of these relations and their outcomes is often felt to be the most unpleasant consequence. The need for such relations also turns out to be one of the primary reasons to take on a job again at a later age (Krijnen, 1993).

The pleasant contacts inherent in such relations result in emotional support and a general sense of belonging, and can help to reduce tension and aversive emotions. This effect is brought about by entering the different kind of reality of just socializing, a time-out from the more stern and impersonal reality of work. Emotional support and sense of belonging probably are also a matter of exposing ourselves to emotional contagion (Schabracq, 1991), i.e. letting ourselves be ‘infected’ by the other’s pleasant mood and livelihood, a phenomenon that Montaigne (1580/1981) had already described in the sixteenth century.

Apart from the pleasurable contacts, belonging to a team or group can be rewarding in itself. Doing things together and being part of a greater social system, forming a ‘we’, can be gratifying in itself. The fact that the others are there as well, and do their work too, also suggests that there is some meaning and logic to our presence and activities at the work site. Moreover, these other people usually are familiar to us, which adds to the predictability of our work environment, and by that to its orderliness. As it is, unfamiliar persons are
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habitually introduced, in a way that their presence becomes understandable and normal (Goffman, 1971, 1972).

Another outcome of a good network is that it enables us to get and give strategic information, warnings, advice, factual help, protection and feedback about our own performance and position. A good network also allows us to team up with other employees to fight our battles. All these outcomes make a well-developed social network important in controlling our work environment: our network determines – and is determined by, for that matter – our informal power position in the organization and its politics. This power position, its direct outcomes and the sense of control resulting from it are of considerable importance in keeping our functioning effective.

All in all, a well-developed social network helps us to develop an optimal freedom of acting, which enables us to focus on our work. Here too, however, when the social network becomes too important, and takes too much time, this interferes with the effectiveness of our work.

Being embedded in the organization as a whole in itself can also bring us important outcomes. The embedding gives us for example a consistent and continuous background that enables us to experience our presence in the organization as normal and real, and also adds to the orderliness of the work environment. The embedding too is a matter of continuous repetition, in this case of displaying ‘normal’ patterns of behaviour, and keeping up normal appearances, to show that nothing special is going on. Most of the time, this display entails conduct and appearance that is considered to be normal in the external environment of the organization too, though the display often is almost imperceptibly styled by the specific organization. By this conduct and appearance, we show how well socialized we are: we belong there and are true members, who can be trusted not to do anything irresponsible or unexpected. We actually can use the word ‘we’.

By styling our behaviour and appearance, we also point tacitly to our place and function in the organization, as well as to the kind of relation we are in at the moment (Vrugt & Schabracq, 1991). This styling involves our body language, linguistic usage, clothing, hairdo and the use of accessories such as glasses, bags and jewellery. Though this styling usually is not explicitly worded, a transgression (wrong conduct, wrong clothes, wrong shoes) usually is obvious at once to all parties. By enacting prescribed conduct, we continuously supply each other, in a completely self-evident way, with the right cues to act in a self-evident way as well (Schabracq, 1991).

When something goes wrong, in the production process or in the social realm, we also have a standard repertoire to repair the normal state of affairs, and to restore orderliness. For example, when we are slipping, we may act as if everything is under control ‘really’, for example by smiling and
pulling a funny face. Other examples are reassuring each other verbally that nothing serious has happened, or by explaining that these things do happen, are nobody’s fault, and do not undermine the reality of our projects. Goffman (1971, 1972) presents a goldmine of other examples. In this way, our relations provide us with a continuous, highly redundant, but tacit series of situational or relational propositions about what is expected of us, and what we can expect from others (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1968). This bombardment with situational proposals is so redundant and omnipresent that it suggests a solid reality, where everything is under control and nasty surprises are excluded. Harré (1979) speaks of ‘social musak’ (‘musak’ being the music in elevators and supermarkets that is supposed to soothe us into feeling at ease).

Another outcome of being embedded in organizational social relationships is that it serves us as a stage. Being embedded in an organization allows us to use our work to show off highly valued work-related qualities, such as professional skills, diligence, collegiality, persistence, sense of humour, courage and creativity. We can even use the organization as a theatre to be good in general. The terms ‘stage’ and ‘theatre’ are not accidental here. An organization offers more distance and privacy than a family, a bigger audience, as well as more off-stage opportunities and time for preparation. We can use our work in this way to develop and demonstrate a beautiful ‘public’ character of a more general kind. This ‘self-expression’ also may have offshoots in wider circles. At least it is good exercise material.

### 20.5.1 Too Little Social Embedding

Too little social embedding implies that we must work without some or all outcomes of that embedding, such as pleasurable contacts, belonging to a group, a comfortable, informal power position, a solid social reality and a stage to perform. Without these outcomes, many people find it hard to focus on their work, and they become less effective, especially when that task is not interesting in itself, or doesn’t have other outcomes they highly value. Many people, moreover, experience isolation, and the anonymity resulting from it as unpleasant. As it is, the social relations at work are the main reason to come to work every day.

The sudden loss of a part of this embedding often is very painful and is experienced as a life event, that is, an event that unsettles our fixed ways of doing things and paying attention, and demands a new adaptation from us. As a result, such a loss of social embedding may interfere with our effectiveness. This may be a matter of our own departure from our department or organization, as well as of the disappearance of other people. Such a loss
may evoke grief and alienation, just as in the case of the loss of a loved one. A lack or loss of social embedding can have very diverse causes. We give the following examples:

- **Lack of feedback, appreciation and support.** Many employees get little feedback, appreciation and support from their manager. This may be a matter of their manager’s poor social skills and being busy with other things. In many organization, however, such a lack is part of the organizational culture. There feedback is only given about things that go wrong. This lack of feedback, appreciation and support may be of negative influence on our motivation, and by that on our effectiveness.

- **Role transitions.** Examples of role transitions in an organization are entry, job change, dismissal, retirement and work disability. Of course, these various transitions greatly differ, also in the degree in which they go together with impairment of functioning. However, in all cases we have to part from a certain position, its activities and its social relations. How this parting is experienced varies, depending on the specific nature of the transition, the degree to which it is voluntary, and the person involved. It can be experienced as a serious loss, with all inherent emotions (e.g. Allen & Van der Vliert, 1984), which interfere with the effectiveness, but it can also be felt as a relief. In general, impending transitions interfere with the effectiveness of functioning in the last stage of the old job. In the case of retirement, this last stage may take many years, the phenomenon of ‘getting in lane’ (Henkens & Van Solinge, 2003), characterized by rejecting training programmes, and letting go.

- **Decay of social networks.** The social networks of elderly employees tend to decay. The people who hired them, their patrons and sponsors have left. Gradually, almost all their favourite, familiar colleagues, superiors, assistants and outside contacts also disappear from sight too. Moreover, older employees often are not inclined to actively fill up the empty spaces, as they tend to be more reserved than the younger ones in this respect (Winnubst & Schabracq, 1996). This implies that elderly employees must abandon an important part of the outcomes of such a network, which can seriously interfere with their effectiveness.

- **Massive layoff.** When an organization slims down – which happens a lot lately – and lays off or outsources many employees, those who stay behind experience the problems mentioned above to an intensified degree. Moreover, such a course of affairs can lead to feelings of unpleasantness and guilt (‘What have we done to be still working here?’). Also, the people who stay are likely to lose their trust in the organization’s intentions. This so-called survivors’ sickness (Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1997) diminishes employees’ commitment and motivation, and, by that, their effectiveness.
Physical barriers that impede social contact. Physical barriers can cause social isolation. An example is the lonely position of a crane driver high above his mates. Noise, or the protection against noise, which makes it impossible to have a conversation, is another example. A third one is the work cubicle, the crude partitioning device to subdivide a larger room, which has become widely known from the *Dilbert* strips. Especially in simple work – in which personal contacts are all important for work satisfaction – such physical hindrances can needlessly impair work satisfaction and motivation.

Communication problems between the top and the work floor. Social isolation at the top of the organization is a serious problem. Apart from interfering with the effectiveness of the manager in question, it harms the quality of the organizational communication in general, both bottom-up (‘The management hasn’t a clue about what we are doing here, and it seems a good idea to keep it that way’) and top-down (‘Some things you cannot explain to them; they just don’t get it’). The causes differ. On the one hand, some managers think it unwise to interact openly with employees because of their possible hidden agendas. Often this is a manager’s defence against the greater attention that employees pay to their manager (see Section 20.5.2). On the other hand, employees tend to feel fearful and unwelcome. Moreover, groups that have incompatible interests often perceive each other in a distorted way, and entertain prejudices and stereotypes about each other. Lastly, both parties can usually improve their social skills considerably. This kind of poor communication and the resulting poor management negatively affect the effectiveness of everyday working life.

A climate of distrust and conflicts. A climate of distrust and conflicts results in contacts remaining limited to the few people we trust, so that we can become rather isolated. A similar outcome may occur in an organization with too much orderliness.

20.5.2 Too Much Social Embedding

Here, we focus on forms of social embedding that demand too much conscious attention from us, which goes at the expense of doing our actual work properly.

Lack of privacy. A good example of lack of privacy is to be found in so-called office gardens. Apart from being aggravating and distracting in its own right, this lack of privacy may lead to self-consciousness, embarrassment and even anxiety of failure. A special case of lack of privacy involves being exposed to stressed and highly emotional colleagues, which
can be highly contagious and disturb the effectiveness of our functioning (Schabracq, 1991).

- A too person-oriented organizational culture. In some organizational cultures, it is usual to share all life’s joys and sorrows with each other, both work-related and private ones. This mutual self-disclosure may easily interfere with the appropriate division of attention needed for work, and hamper our effectiveness. This interference especially occurs when people are very busy, or when failing to pay attention to our colleagues is interpreted as being unkind.

- Unbalanced social exchange – getting more than we give. Getting much more attention and feeling than we give is part of the fate of ‘stars’. As a result, their everyday reality has become much larger than life, while, as human beings, they are able to cope only with a normally sized life. For many ‘stars’, this dilemma interferes with the manageability of their everyday work situations, especially when they believe in their extraordinary status, which is more likely to happen to somebody with poor self-esteem. This variant of unbalance is by the way an important theme in literature (the Greek dramas, Shakespeare, etc.), as well as in the popular media.

- Continuously changing social settings. Having to work all the time in different and changing teams or projects, with different managers and diverse people, with divergent priorities and competencies, can interfere with our effectiveness. This interference occurs for example a lot in matrix organizations or consulting firms. In a multinational organization, this may also be a matter of working in different countries, with people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. A seemingly simpler variant of this in a relatively stable work environment is getting a new manager.

### 20.6 THE WORK ENVIRONMENT: COMPATIBILITY OF CONVICTIONS, VALUES AND GOALS

Employees and organizations both have their convictions, values and goals, and, in a sense, the same applies to our organizations. As long as our personal convictions, values and goals are compatible with the organizational ones, which usually is the case, they jointly determine and shape our everyday work and relationships. Sometimes, however, they are not compatible, and this then interferes with our effectiveness. To give some idea of the issues that may give rise to incompatibilities of organizational convictions and our own ones, we give the following (not fully mutually exclusive) examples:

- What the organization is about, its reason for being there, its goals.
- How the organization should relate to its environment.
• What the constituent parts of the organization are, and how these parts should relate to each other.
• What we talk about and attend to in the organization, or more simply: what ‘really’ exists, and what ‘does not exist’. This has all kinds of implications for what we can and may do, think and say.
• What is good and what is bad in the organization: the organizational virtues and sins, and their relative importance.
• How power is divided and exercised.
• How the organization sees, values and treats its employees, and the relevant categories and criteria here.
• How the members of the organization are expected to relate to each other.
• The commitment, effort and productivity that are expected.

Generally speaking, a good fit on the above issues is an important factor in the effectiveness of a work environment, as it allows us to do our work in a self-evident way. From our individual perspective, a good fit means also that we can to a sufficient degree accomplish our personal goals in and by our work. The compatibility of personal and organizational convictions, values and goals usually comes about rather organically. First, organizations and potential employees select each other. Then the employees who have been selected are socialized, that is, they learn about and accept the organizational convictions and values. In the longer run, acceptation turns into identification, and the organizational convictions and values become their own. The people who don’t fit in often go away by themselves, or are dismissed (Schneider, 1987), which, of course, doesn’t exclude all individual problems.

20.6.1 Too Little Compatibility of Convictions, Values and Goals

It has become clear that too little compatibility between our own and the organizational convictions and values leads to poor effectiveness. Here, some descriptions of specific causes of too little compatibility are described:

• *Organizational change.* Often incompatibility of convictions, values and goals arises when organizations change radically, for example by a reorganization, merger, privatization or the appointment of a new manager. Goals as greater quantity of production, more flexibility and being more client-directed can become prominent, while values such as technical perfection and professional freedom can lose their dominant role. However, the latter two may have been for us the very reason to work there. The change then leaves us with work that has been stripped of many of its
challenges and meaning. Some of these changes are especially relevant for employees over 50.

The most important problem with many organizational changes, especially for employees over 50, is that many of these changes go against what the organizations expected of these employees previously. During their working life, many older employees have effectively unlearned to act in the way the organization now asks from them. Organizations nowadays have to become flatter, as well as more flexible, transparent, less product- and more market-oriented, etc. The principal consequence is that employees have to become more autonomous, decisive and creative: they have to act as if they were ‘internal entrepreneurs’, who work for themselves, and not for an organization owned by other people. To some people – especially some older employees – however, the formula ‘be free and make us rich’ is absurd. Moreover, older employees often have learned, mostly the hard way, to mistrust management intentions. Stories about employability and the disappearance of lifetime employment do not improve things.

- **Discrepancy between ‘espoused theory’ and ‘theory in use’**. Another issue of incompatible convictions and values is usually more problematic to younger employees than to older ones, namely the problems that may arise when the organization is ambiguous about its own convictions and values. This ambiguity is mostly a matter of depicting a much nicer image of its own convictions and values – the ‘espoused theory’ – than the convictions and values that determine the actual everyday reality – the ‘theory in use’ (Schon, 1983). When newcomers innocently identify with the nicer image, which even can be the reason why they come to work there, they are bound for trouble.

### 20.6.2 Too Much Compatibility of Values and Goals

- **Giving more than we get**. When we embrace organizational or job values and goals too intensely, we cannot say no to requests that appeal to these values or goals. When we for example fully identify with the values and goals of nursing or social work, it becomes very difficult to turn down a request for help from a client. Instead, we see responding to the request as our calling, and tend to take on more and more. Being unable to say no to our work can also be a matter of liking that work very much, and being very good at it. As a result, people bite off more than they can chew, even to the extent that they do little else, and their effectiveness diminishes. All these forms of imbalance can be characterized as ‘giving more than we get’, the mirror image of ‘getting more than we give’, or stardom. Younger employees, who have not yet learned to develop and guard their
own limits, are, on average, more susceptible to this imbalance than older employees.

In the long run, giving more than we get can result in burnout (Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003), and all kinds of physical complaints such as ME and RSI. These complaints can be characterized as functional, that is, these complaints incapacitate us so much that they effectively take us out of the situation that caused them. The impersonal, and sometimes even antisocial, demeanour characteristic of burnout can be seen as an awkward form of self-protection against the tendency to give much more than we get.

20.7 INTERVENTIONS

Reading the text of this chapter is a good preparation for workshops to improve the effectiveness of teams and departments. Such a workshop is facilitated by one or, preferably, two change agents. The participants of a workshop are members of a team, or department, including the team or department manager. The maximum group size lies somewhere around 16 persons. For bigger groups a system of representation is used, in which each workshop participant represents one or two colleagues. Representing others then implies that the person who represents one or two other persons goes through step 7 (to be described later in this section) with the people he represents.

The everyday reality of the work floor here is the point of departure. The approach consists of mapping the main sources of ineffectiveness within the team and department, finding out about the causes of these sources and their mutual relations, devising as many solutions as possible, determining the best solutions, implementing these solutions, and monitoring and improving these solutions. This approach encompasses the following steps.

1. The members of the organization individually read the text of this chapter, about the sources of ineffectiveness.
2. Each member then composes a top five of sources of ineffectiveness in his own team or department.
3. If possible, all the data can be assembled and then analysed with the help of some basic statistics and data-mining techniques. This can give the change agents some insights in the most relevant causes of ineffectiveness. This step can be very helpful, but is not strictly necessary.

5 In Schabracq (2007) checklists are to be found that correspond with the abovementioned factors of ineffectiveness, which can be used as an appropriate tool in this respect.
4. The change agents interview key representatives of the team or department. The information generated by step 3 can be used as point of departure. If this information is not available, the personal top five of the key representative in question serves as point of departure. The interviewer tries to surface underlying causes of the sources of ineffectiveness, as well as relevant assumptions and goals. Steps 3 and 4 are meant as a preparation for the change agents, which may also help them to custom-tailor the workshop.

5. The workshop will take one day part to two whole days. Separate day parts can be used to work out particular issues. The workshop takes place in a place outside the organization, with good catering and, if needed, sleeping facilities, where the members are not disturbed by other stakeholders.

6. The workshop starts with a short discussion of the text by the change agent(s), and answering all possible questions about the text.

7. The members of the workshop divide themselves in groups of three or four, and discuss their top fives for 45 to 60 minutes, to find a common top five of sources of ineffectiveness.

8. The subgroups reassemble, and their top fives are pooled on a whiteboard or flip-over. A number one gets five points, a number two four, and so on. The points of similar or the same sources of ineffectiveness are added. The intention is to pool sources, to come to as small as possible number of sources of ineffectiveness arranged in order of importance.

9. The causes of the different sources of ineffectiveness and their relations are examined by the whole group. A good rule of thumb here is the Pareto principle, i.e.: 20% of the causes accounts for 80% of the effects.

10. The workshop first examines what can be done about the most important source of ineffectiveness and its causes. Then the next important one is discussed, and so on. The intention is to find as many interventions per source of ineffectiveness, and their causes.

11. The next step consists of combining solutions, looking for better, more pleasant and more intelligent solutions and testing their feasibility and practical value. Team members can implement some of these solutions themselves. Other solutions demand actions of a manager, an HR officer or an external consultant.

12. The team or department divides the responsibilities for each of the actions over the different members. This is primarily a matter of voluntarily taking responsibility for a certain activity.

13. For each action, a time path is developed with sub-goals and deadlines. Essentially this involves each time the who, what and when.

14. A date is set for the next meeting. Each of the members agrees to keep track of everything that goes wrong, or not completely right, and
promises to think of solutions for these issues. These problems and solutions subsequently are the input for the next session.

15. During the next sessions the change agents are doing the facilitating as well, but remain more in the background, while the manager is now the facilitator.

16. The next step can then consist of the change agents coaching the manager.

The essence of this approach is inciting the team and department members to solve their own problems, creating support and a platform for their solutions in the process. In practice, the main problems to be solved here usually are communicational and planning problems. Important underlying causes often lie in the area of ethics. Important issues are responsibility, honesty, courage, fairness and justice.

REFERENCES