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Alternatives to Hierarchy in Feminist Organizational Design:

A Case Study

Introduction

Many non-profit and social-change organizations, working to make the world a better place, manage to create work environments that are social nightmares for their staffs. The lack of good management in these organizations often drives their most dedicated employees and volunteers away, frustrated and resentful. (Britell, 1992, 84)

Beyond management practices, which include issues of power and particular difficulty with the role of executive director (Martin, 1990; Ristock, 1991), there seem to be many other obstacles to the effective functioning of such organizations. Issues of class, gender, and ethnicity challenge increasingly multi-cultural and mixed economic workforces: "The attempt to replace stultifying hierarchical systems with organizational designs that are structureless produces covert structures which are even more problematic to those whose work lives they define" (Freeman, 1974). The scarcity of workable models and a lack of skill in implementing collaborative processes often results in a reversion to traditional designs with ensuing frustration and anger (Greaves, 1991). Additionally, I suggest that the very personal investment which most staff in these organizations bring to their work polarizes them from within, if they differ philosophically or politically, and can create factions, both among staff and between staff and board members. Finally, these difficulties have been both exposed and fuelled by the fact that many of these organizations, finding themselves in the midst of internal chaos, often become the focus of negative media attention as well (Freedman, 1993).

Karon and I were co-consultants to the organization, participating equally in all data collection, diagnosis, and intervention roles. The consultation was not conducted for research purposes, but rather at the request of The Refuge in order to help improve organizational functioning.²

Apart from exploring the issues that were encountered by The Refuge, this article outlines briefly the interventions that were designed to respond to these issues, and provides an overview of the organizational model that resulted from the consultation and has been in operation for several years. It is hoped that this information will provide, not a "recipe" to be transplanted, but some inspiration and methodological help for other organizations that might be struggling with the challenge of "re-inventing" themselves so that their structure is more consistent with their values. In my view, redesign efforts such as these are a pragmatic enactment of feminist principles in organizational contexts and deserve attention to both their outcomes and their process.

The Refuge

In 1992, when the consultation took place, The Refuge was in its seventh year of operation, with twenty staff members, eight board members, and an operating budget of just under a million dollars from a variety of funding sources. Its stated purpose at the time was to provide, in the organization's words, "legal, counselling, cultural interpretation, community education, and advocacy services for women who are victims of violence." Significantly, the review that we conducted was the second commissioned by the organization within two years. During that period, several key staff members had resigned, including three executive directors, and the board of directors had also experienced a high rate of turnover. Clearly, this was an organization in considerable turmoil. However, the issues identified by the Organization Review Steering Committee as the presenting problems were only the proverbial "tip of the iceberg." They included perceived value differences among board and staff members, resulting in a lack of trust between the groups; decision-making processes that were often dysfunctional; roles that were unclear; and a lack of effective mechanisms for conflict management.

It should be noted here that every organization with which I work experiences difficulties in some or all of these areas. These issues are certainly not restricted to feminist organizations. One might assume that feminist women would be more amenable to collaborative processes, and therefore find implementing alternatives to hierarchy easier than in mixed-gender organizations; however, it appears not to be the case in this particular example. Although the intentions and philosophy of The Refuge hold collaboration as an ideal, as in all such organizations, in my experience, there is a gap between the vision and the reality. Therefore, based on an initial assessment we identified, with the Steering

Committee (comprised of both board and staff personnel), some preliminary goals for the review. These were the following:

- To assess the internal organizational functioning of The Refuge regarding changes needed in processes and structures;
- To clarify the roles of board and staff groups relative to each other, explore differences in values and approaches, build trust, design mechanisms for dealing with conflict, and address any blocks to clear and constructive communication within and between these groups;
- To assist the board and staff in designing and implementing necessary structural changes, in order to facilitate their determining strategic directions for The Refuge and managing most effectively the day-to-day operations of the organization.

A variety of complex and interrelated issues were unearthed through several data collection methods. These included a thorough review of organizational documentation, as well as focus-group interviews with three separate groups of board and staff members; individual interviews both in person and by telephone; and several follow-up letters written by those who chose the anonymity of this medium to express their concerns. The consultation process was guided throughout by ongoing meetings with the Organization Review Steering Committee and characterized by consistent communication with all staff and board members regarding proposed interventions.

The next section outlines the issues in some detail, relating them to recent feminist research. The purpose here is to explore the hypothesis that the issues that were identified, although enacted in unique ways by different feminist organizations, tend to be generic and therefore predictable. Perhaps some anticipation of these concerns, as well as a recognition that they are both understandable contextually as well as manageable organizationally, will help groups of women experimenting with alternatives to hierarchy to avoid some of the "growing pains" associated with this pursuit.

Key Issues Identified

The Structural Dilemma

the beliefs that:

- empowerment and self-determination are at the core of both service provision and organizational functioning;
- collaboration and consensual decision-making are critical for staff motivation and commitment;
- open communication and effective conflict management at all levels of the organization are key goals; and
- leadership serves to coordinate and facilitate ("power with" rather than "power over").

These beliefs imply an organizational form that is collaborative and non-hierarchical. However, funding imperatives force organizations such as these into a more traditional structure, with a board that is fiscally accountable to funders such as the United Way, and an Executive Director in the role of "senior manager." The result is on-going board/staff power struggles, as accountability issues cause board members and the executive director to revert to the "default setting" of their traditional social coding ("managers are ultimately accountable for organizational policy," etc.), while staff members alternate between the dependence on authority of their own social coding and the counterdependence which is a predictable response in their struggle for control. As one astute board member at The Refuge noted,

By giving the responsibility for setting direction, establishing policy and ensuring effective management to the board, a de facto power struggle is set up. 'Maximizing staff input and involvement' just doesn't cut it. The question of accountability has never been clarified—who is accountable for what to whom? (Board Member, written response)

Another board member reveals her frustration with this dilemma in her comment:

You can't have it both ways — that is, the board has ultimate responsibility for The Refuge, but the board and staff operate as partners...power is power!" (Board Member, focus-group interview).

The problem is exacerbated when one considers that the board members are volunteers, while the staff members are salaried. This has the potential to create mixed feelings regarding volunteerism

among feminists, including perceptions of board members as "exploited labourers," or, alternately, as more politically free because they're not paid. It may also raise the issue of exclusivity in the board membership, given that low-income women might not be able to afford to volunteer their services. Finally, it raises the possibility of resentment among board members that their time isn't being formally "valued."

Another significant issue is the fact that many of the women employed or volunteering in sheltering and anti-violence organizations often, themselves, have been victims of abuse. When survivors of abuse have had the opportunity to work through individual emotional issues, they can perform their roles with tremendous commitment and useful insight into the client's experience. However, when personal issues have not yet been resolved, emotional concerns related to power and control often emerge. These can be difficult to recognize and even more difficult to manage organizationally. Struthers calls women's organizations "the organizational containers of (women's) personal experience" (Struthers, 1994, 4). Although issues related to power are generally part of the human condition, Liem and O'Toole (1992) describe research findings that indicate a particularly profound sense of powerlessness in victims of sexual abuse. This is combined with a strong need for power, resulting in extremely conflicted relationships with those who have formal authority in a work setting, "This preoccupation with power can manifest itself both as...an increased desire to exert influence and control over people and outcomes, and as a continuing fear of the power of others" (Liem & O'Toole, 1992, 68).

Apart from these concerns, research indicates that a socialized tendency to equate power with "unfeminine" self-interest makes issues of power particularly contentious in an all-woman work environment (Woolsey & McBain, 1987; Bardwick, 1977; Miller 1982).

At The Refuge, unexplicated and unresolved power relationships were manifested in fear and mistrust on the part of both staff and board groups in relation to each other. Anger, pain and feelings of helplessness were eroding energy. Neither group wanted the board and executive director to have ultimate decision-making authority as in a traditional hierarchical structure. In fact, it was decided that a new executive director would not be hired to replace the third one to leave in two years. However, both groups also rejected a collective structure, recognizing the inefficiency of having thirty people involved in making every decision by consensus. Also, an implicitly defined or structureless design was recognized as potentially dangerous, in view of the conflicted attitudes regarding power previously outlined. The Refuge members would agree with Marilyn Struthers that "Only a relational structure,

explicitly defined on the basis of a critical organizational theory, has the ability to alter the default settings of members steeped in the social norms to which they stand in critical opposition" (Struthers, 1994, 17). However, the organization saw no alternatives at the time other than the two extremes of collectivity or hierarchy.

With both hierarchy and collectivity rejected as viable options, and no alternatives evident initially, the structural dilemma for The Refuge seemed insurmountable.

Managing Conflict

Although difficulties in managing conflict are not unique to women's organizations (Laiken 1994a; Manz et al., 1990), women tend to be particularly reluctant to identify conflictual issues. Woolsey and McBain (1987) discovered what they term "intransigent conflict" in a large number of women's groups, despite the use of counselling and mediation interventions. Several feminist researchers attribute this phenomenon to a variety of causes: feminist values support affirming and strengthening bonds among women, which inhibits criticism; traditional female values support nurturance and collaboration; the importance to women of their work relationships causes reluctance to express anger directly for fear of abandonment; women's early socialization produces conflict avoidance as a learned behaviour to exact the benevolence of those who control the resources; the traditionally inferior status of women begets self-doubt and low self-esteem, making it difficult to express anger openly and directly; and finally, the fact that various ethnocultural groups experience and deal with conflict in different ways, making conflict management an even more complex process in a multicultural context (Miller, 1977; Woolsey and McBain, 1987; Bardwick, 1977).

The outcome of conflict avoidance for such women's organizations as The Refuge is the presence of resentments which are never acknowledged, along with small annoyances that build disproportionately, and eventually become explosive. Alternately, a release of the tension is sought through forming coalitions of potential allies against those who are perceived as threatening. If this is the context within which the issues of power and control raised earlier are also coming to the surface, it is not difficult to imagine an environment in which feelings of trust and group cohesiveness seem like unattainable goals. The intensity of this dilemma is magnified by the fact that it is exactly these issues that many women's organizations are attempting to address in their work and hoping to exemplify positively in

their organizational functioning.

Issues of Difference

A third challenge for social-change organizations is to some extent engendered by their political agenda. In their commitment to employment equity and cultural diversity among the workforce, their employees tend to be more intentionally representative of the communities they serve than do those of other organizations. However, if, as in the case of The Refuge, their funding needs require a volunteer board of directors, sheer economics dictate that board members will likely be middle-class white women of privilege, who have both the time and the inclination to voluntarily support social-change projects, as well as having easy access to potential sources of funding. The extent of difference in class, ethnicity, educational background and lifestyle, within the staff group itself and between the staff and board members, is a certain source of potential conflict.³

The Refuge members were fully aware of these concerns, as one staff person pointed out: "We're paying more attention to race, culture and power differences — at least we're acknowledging the issues exist. Now we need to recognize the difficulties as they arise, and be willing to work through them" (Staff Member, focus-group interview). However, as Argyris (1990) notes, there is often a vast difference in an organization between its "espoused theory" (beliefs and values), and its "theory-in-use" (actual practices).

In the case of The Refuge, both board and staff groups viewed themselves as "different breeds," and basic assumptions about each other's belief systems tended to go unexplored. In fact, so potent was the fear of expressing themselves before the other group (especially among staff who felt less powerful), that it took several months of work with each group separately before they would agree to meet together to discuss their mutual vision for The Refuge. As one board member observed: "Board and staff are different breeds, and the conflicts often do seem to be around values; there may be differences in management philosophy, and board members are not as personally invested in the work of The Refuge (as are the staff)" (Board Member; focus-group interview). Board members also made assumptions about the staff not perceiving them as "politically correct enough," and staff members admitted that they, too, saw large differences between the groups in terms of political ideology. In fact, they noted that these often "sensitive issues" were rarely dealt with even during staff-only meetings (from board and staff interviews).

Although much of this perception of difference, particularly in philosophy and commitment, was based on assumptions that proved, for the most part, to be exaggerated, there were some genuine differences that created major gaps in understanding.

The assumption of difference, as well as the reality, created an environment in The Refuge replete with what Argyris (1990) refers to as "defensive routines." These are described by Senge (1990) as habitual ways of interacting that protect us from the pain of appearing uncertain or ignorant. Rather, we polarize around differing and strongly held values, and tend to be without mechanisms to make these polarities discussable. As Audre Lorde points out: "It is not our differences which separate women, but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences" (Lorde, 1984, 122).⁴

In order for any of these issues to be managed effectively, deliberate structures and processes need to be included as part of the on-going functioning of the organization. Struthers points out that "Without support, like a tent without a frame, the organizational structure flaps with any gust of contentious wind. Those least marginal, and most personally powerful by virtue of social location, will form its structure by default" (Struthers, 1994, 16-17).

In writing about the process of "dialogue" and the concept of "polarity management," Peter Senge (1990) and Barry Johnson (1992) offer procedural structures to help make issues of organizational diversity discussable. Senge encourages both a position of "advocacy" (clarity about one's own opinions) and one of "inquiry" (a willingness to truly attend to the ideas of others) in an environment that promotes, not a "win-lose" debate, but open interaction to identify and hold the differences. The trust that such dialogue engenders helps make possible constructive approaches to highly charged issues.

According to Johnson, issues of diversity are not problems to solve, but polarities to manage. He claims "it is the incompleteness combined with the conviction of rightness (accuracy)...which is the source of a potential problem" (Johnson, 1992, 44). His polarity management maps help groups or individuals who stand on opposite sides of a pole to recognize the "up" and "down" sides of both

ends of the polarity, and thus appreciate more fully the position of the other, as well as have one's own stance better understood:

As evidence of the effectiveness of these methods in practice, Laurie Edmiston (1994) cites a detailed case example of a feminist Community Health Centre for immigrant women, where she volunteered as a board member. In this setting, traditional conflict management interventions failed to alleviate the kinds of problems outlined in this paper, while a facilitated dialogue process helped to revive an organization on the verge of extinction. The women Edmiston interviewed said: "Whereas the goal of the conflict resolution process was reconciliation, the intent of the dialogue process was simply to get people talking. The premise was that it was okay not to sort out our problems. In the end, everyone became aware of each other's history and perspectives, without the need to agree. We discovered that we have more in common than in diversity" (Edmiston, 1994, 2 — taken from personal communication with board members).

Although such methods as polarity management and dialogue exist, and have successfully helped organizations to manage in diversity, one of the issues faced by The Refuge was its lack of exposure to or experience with such models.

Scarcity of Workable Models and Lack of Skill in Implementing Alternatives

Much of the recent feminist literature has provided a number of efficient and life-enhancing alternatives to traditional organizational mechanisms. As Struthers says:

Hierarchy and collectivity are often set as opposite poles of a masculine and feminine dialectic. The misplaced emphasis on collectivity as feminist structural form obscures the manner in which women's organizations are modifying both traditional hierarchical and collective forms to gain efficiency, size, and at the same time, respond to the ideological imperatives of feminism. (Struthers, 1994,14}

As early as 1977, Judith Bardwick was writing about "modified structures" to specify constraints on power and broaden input to decision-making. Even earlier, Jo Freeman railed against "the tyranny of structurelessness" which was resulting from a "pendulum swing" from hierarchy to collectivity (Freeman, 1974). More recently, Robin Leidner supports employing some standard organizational practices to overcome the difficulties that have plagued many feminist organizations, such as "overwhelming

emotional intensity, ideological factionism, leadership trashing and stifling of dissent" (Leidner, 1993, 4). This researcher describes several forms of democratic innovation experimented with in the National Women's Studies Association (Leidner, 1991), while Kathleen Iannello writes about three other organizations practicing what she terms "modified consensus" in their decision-making process (Iannello, 1992). A literature review by Marilyn Struthers suggested five types of alternative and collaborative "structural mechanisms" (Struthers 1994).

Why, then, should there be a paucity of workable models to guide an organization like The Refuge in its quest for a new organizational form? To begin with, the existing literature on organizational change, although helpful to some extent in the private and public sectors, tends to be rejected by feminist organizations as "corporate" and "gendered." As Struthers says: "Existing corporate organizational theory takes into account neither the relational reality of women in organizations, nor the effect of an explicit politics created by a critical perspective" (Struthers, 1994, 28). The case in question illustrates the impact of this belief.

As consultants to The Refuge, we were engaged in the second organizational review to have been commissioned within two years. Even though both Karon and I were recognized as feminist in our orientation, as well as experienced organization consultants, our interventions were often met with suspicion and resistance. Interviews and meetings were continually rescheduled or cancelled, and every process proposal was questioned in detail, despite the fact that all proposals resulted from lengthy consultations with the representative Steering Committee. When asked about their desired outcomes for this consultation, several board and staff members expressed the concern that nothing would change, while at the same time assuring us as consultants that our style and methods were credible and acceptable to Refuge personnel.

Beyond the apparent lack of credibility of organizational theory, the theory in practice provides even less help. Feminist organizations, at least in the Toronto area where The Refuge is located, have recently received a plethora of negative media attention (reference the June Callwood story, "White Woman's Burden," in the April 1993 issue of *Saturday Night*). In describing the Nellie's women's hostel story, journalist Adele Freedman says: "The themes were age-old: power, race, justice — with the late-century nuances of personality, feminist teachings and what came to be called the death

of liberalism" (40). In response to this article, Anne Melgaard writes a "letter to the editor" in the next issue of the magazine, saying: "I did not need to read the details to know what happened at Nellie's. Many women's organizations, including the one I belong to, are experiencing the same story...There are few rules on how to work together that are not patriarchal" (Melgaard, 1993).

At the end of her literature review in search of new organizational forms, Marilyn Struthers concludes that "the literature generally reveals few organizational mechanisms to structure inclusion, and little theory about the effects of the mechanisms used" (Struthers, 1994, 25). Furthermore, she notes, significantly, that none of these approaches addresses changing the actual structure of the organization. Therein, of course, lies the problem.

If none of the feminist organizations that have appeared in the literature or in practice successfully demonstrates an actual restructuring of their organizational design, the role models for newer organizations such as the Refuge are non-existent. Furthermore, as Struthers notes, "A structure or structural mechanism cannot be transplanted without adjustment from one location to the other...The process by which a group of people creates and recreates its structure is as important as its form" (Struthers, 1994, 20). Therein, of course, lies the possibility.

Refuge members were, by their own admission, lacking in process skills ("even agreed-upon processes are sometimes circumvented" — Board Member; and "sometimes attention to process is seen as impeding the work of The Refuge" — Staff Member). However, they were also willing to concede that developing process skills was an important part of the work towards organizational change. The following was noted:

We need to have clear mechanisms and skills for conflict management, to encourage more productive and less stressful conflict, maybe with the help of a facilitator. We also need to honour people's readiness for confronting conflict to ensure safety, and to help them bring issues to staff meetings for debate. Finally, we need to attend to language and jargon, and learn to give and receive feedback without being defensive. (Staff Member, written response)

The final section of this paper will illustrate how these processes were enhanced at The Refuge and outline the organizational model that was developed through the consistent and strategic use of these processes by board and staff members.

The Consulting Intervention

The key issues identified through the data collection process, and outlined in this paper, indicated the need and the potential for a radical redesign of The Refuge's organizational structure.⁵

At the same time, it was clear that the process was as critical as the outcome for organizational learning. Assumptions needed to be recognized and clarified. Conflict emanating from diversity, as well as from issues of power and control, needed general acknowledgement and a "safe container" for expression and dialogue. Refuge staff and board members needed an opportunity to consider a variety of options before together creating an organizational form that was consistent with their shared beliefs. Finally, relationships with clients and funders had to be continued in a credible manner while the work of reorganizing was occurring.

Data feedback meetings held with the staff and board groups separately were the first opportunity for us as consultants to verify our findings and to allow the members to publicly acknowledge the issues that were identified. Although the issues were consistent between the two groups, the major concern, especially among the staff members, was ensuring a "safe" enough environment for the groups to meet together to discuss the findings. Two half-day visioning meetings were the venue for this phase of the process, with part of the first one spent in generating an agreed-upon list of guidelines to assist group members in respectful communication and appropriate confrontation. The remaining time in these meetings was spent in identifying individual and then group visions, values, and philosophy regarding The Refuge and its operation. Although a shared "statement of philosophy" was the eventual outcome of these sessions, more critical was the process, which allowed group members to express deeply-held beliefs about their work in an environment which was kept open and positive, despite key differences.

The next full-day planning meeting was scheduled for one month after the visioning process. The intervening period was intended as a learning and reflection phase, in which all group members, as well as we two consultants, committed to "researching," both in the literature and in current practice, organizational models which were felt to be consistent with the now mutually-shared vision for the Refuge. Notes and diagrams were sent or faxed among all of the members, and these were then brought to a day-long "model-building" session, during which the group was to design its "ideal"

organizational model.

It was at this point that a minor setback threatened to impede the process. The staff group, in an attempt to empower themselves in their interaction with the board, met separately two days before the planned session and designed their own organizational model, which they intended to present as a proposal to the board group. A board member heard about this "in camera" meeting, phoned the consultants, and complained that the board had not had the same opportunity to meet and design. Somehow, what had felt like "a level playing field" was suddenly not. Of course, the staff members might rightfully have claimed that the playing field had never been level, given the power differentials previously outlined in this paper. However, all had committed to a process that had now been usurped, and the board members felt this was simply a reenactment of the board/staff issues that had originally instigated the consultation.

Karon and I agreed that this concern needed to be addressed before planning work could continue. We began the next all-member session by meeting separately with the two groups to discuss the change in dynamics brought about by the new developments. Following this discussion, the staff group apologized to the board for contravening their agreement, and offered their model as one of the many under consideration, promising to allow it to be "dissected" and rebuilt to meet the participants' mutual needs. The board, in turn, acknowledged the staff's concerns regarding power differences and asked the consultants to help keep this issue alive throughout the discussions.

The model-building day was successfully spent in a combination of activities that involved small, mixed board/staff groupings in defining various aspects of their proposed model, and then presenting these to the total group for discussion, approval, and changes before continuing their work. Notes on the "researched" models were posted around the room for reference, as were the philosophy statements, to ensure that all proposals were consistent with The Refuge vision.

The description of the organizational model that follows was the outcome of that day's work. Although it may be unique, and is certainly creative, it does not reflect the most important aspect of the work it represents. That is the richness of the dialogue — including disagreements, clarifications, surfacing of assumptions, and expression of fears and excitement that accompanied each decision made.

The model became the framework for continuing project group discussions to refine each specific aspect. In the ensuing months, both board and staff members had ample opportunity to practice the process skills they would need to maintain the trust that was building, and to continue communicating across their differences, about the operational plans and policies that would drive the future work of their organization.

The Organizational Design: An Alternative to Hierarchy

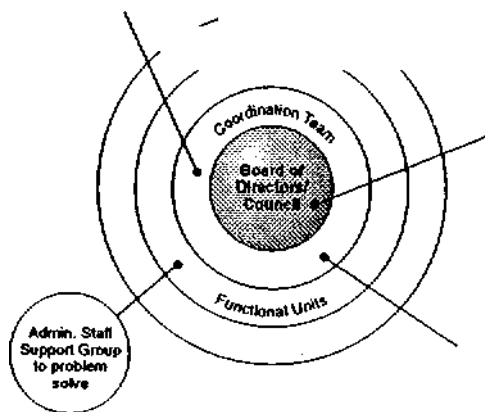
Figure 1 illustrates the preliminary design that resulted from the model-building process. (*Sorry – the scanning process messed up this figure*)

Figure 1 — Model Building Process

Staff rotated into these Limited term

* Responsible for:

- financial
- strategic directions
- policies
- devt. of Board



* Each Board member spends 1 day a year in each functional unit

Changes to this design continue to this day, as the

* 1 person from ea

intention was that the model be viewed as organic rather than static — a responsive structure that would meet the changing needs of an evolving organization.

Before describing the model in detail, I wish to reiterate that it is presented here not as a recommended "ideal" for all organizations of this type, but as one alternative among many which was designed to meet the needs of The Refuge at a specific point in time. I also wish to emphasize my

belief, and I think Refuge members would agree, that the process of creating this model was as important as, if not more important, than the outcome.

a) The outer ring is intended to represent the context in which The Refuge operates, including the social climate, trends, and clients' needs that are consistently driving strategic directions and goals. In order to remain connected in an "open system" within this context, the organization is committed to designing mechanisms to continually collect data on the changing needs and impact of this environment.

b) The second ring is entitled "Functional Units," and represents the various units of service provided by The Refuge. Each unit is comprised of staff who are trained in a particular technical skill (i.e., counselling, legal services, etc.), and one support staff person whose time is dedicated to the unit. Cross-functional ad hoc committees are formed as needed to deal with specific Refuge issues, while all support staff from each unit meet weekly as an Administrative Staff Support Team to problem-solve issues specific to their work.

c) The third ring is entitled "Coordination Team" and is intended to provide coordination leadership to all functional units, as well as facilitation within each separate unit. Although this team replaces the role of executive director, the functional units are not accountable to the members of the Coordination Team as they would be to a traditional manager. In fact, the model is based more on an academic-type structure, in which the department Chair is filled by faculty members who are rotated into the position every few years. Similarly, staff from the functional units are chosen by their colleagues to be rotated into the Coordination Team positions and developed in their jobs to be ready for this role at some point in their career with The Refuge. Although the Coordination Team members are paid a higher salary than their colleagues to compensate them for the additional responsibility, every employee has the opportunity to fill this role; the employee's salary is adjusted once he/she leaves it to reassume her/his functional unit membership. An administrative support staff person is chosen by the Support Staff Team to be assigned to this group on a rotational basis. This person also serves a support function for the board of directors.

d) The fourth ring was entitled the "Board of Directors" when the model was first

proposed. However, there was discussion about renaming it "The Council," with some concern expressed regarding credibility with funders. This issue was yet to be resolved at the end of the model-building session. The board group is comprised of the members of the Coordination Team, to ensure board familiarity with the work of The Refuge, as well as an equal number of community members selected by a board/staff committee. Each of these members sits on the board for a limited term, and is expected to spend one day a year in each functional unit, to familiarize herself with Refuge realities. The board as a group is responsible for its own development and operation, retains legal and fiscal accountability for The Refuge, and sets strategic directions, policies, and guidelines within which staff can freely and autonomously make operational decisions. It is part of the responsibility of each Coordination Team member to ensure that her functional unit members' input is consistently solicited in the setting of policies and strategic directions.⁶

Conclusion

The case described in this paper and the organizational issues it exemplifies could be dismissed as unique, and therefore unimportant in the larger realm of organizational learning and redesign. However, both current research and practice in the world of work provide convincing evidence that the issues are generic. This may be particularly true for organizations with a mandate for social change; it is most commonly demonstrated by those which are feminist in their orientation. However, I maintain that these are bellweather organizations in the truest sense. As employees across sectors become increasingly demanding of alternative work structures which involve participation at all levels of decision-making, the organizations that have been struggling with these alternatives and their consequences will take the lead in providing workable models and process awareness. Kathleen Iannello notes that "in (American auto firms) and other cases, prospects for profit have brought intense attention to the benefits of consensus, which feminists and others have known about for decades" (Iannello, 1992, 122), and she emphasizes that "the pervasiveness of this type of organization needs to be documented" (Iannello, 1992, 123). It is the intention of this article to contribute to this documentation, by delineating the issues that need consideration, and providing a process and a model that may assist other organizations in their quest for innovative forms.

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1. I am grateful to the following people for their extremely thoughtful comments on this paper Karen Blackford (Laurentian University) and three anonymous reviewers: OISE graduate students Laurie Edmiston and Ellen Russell; Wendy Weeks (Author of *Women Working Together: Lessons From Feminist Women's Services*); and Jeff Solway, my life partner and best editor. I also wish to acknowledge Karon West, my consulting colleague, and all of the board and staff members of The Refuge who participated with consistent good will in the organizational redesign project described in this paper.
2. Although Karon's role as my partner ended with the close of the project, and I am writing this paper several years later, I am indebted to her for her participation in the original diagnosis and analysis, much of which is incorporated into this article. It should be noted that, as white middle-class women of privilege, Karon and I were aware that we brought a particular perspective to the consulting process. We tried to be consistently conscious of how that perspective might be affecting our understanding of The Refuge. I have also attempted to do so in writing this piece.
3. Organizations do have the option of providing childcare, transportation, and meal funding for board members, which might offer less privileged women the opportunity to join the board. In their final organizational design, The Refuge attempted to respond to this need to have board members be more representative of their client community.
4. This issue is not at all exclusive to women's organizations, but would tend to be true of any politically committed organization with a mandate for social change. It has, in fact, occurred repeatedly in the consulting experience of the author in mixed gender organizations such as environmental groups, housing cooperatives, etc. It seems to be particularly prevalent in organizations with volunteer boards.
5. The consulting intervention was mandated to deal solely with the internal structure and functioning of the organization. A separate study was being conducted simultaneously to solicit client feedback on service delivery. The author and The Refuge are indebted to John Carver 1990; William Kraus 1980; Gareth Morgan 1986; Travis and Callander 1990; Ulrich

and Lake 1991; Karon West, Paul Woolner, and various women's organizations in the Toronto area for many of the concepts which helped to create The Refuge's organizational model. It should be noted here that, although this (or any) model may sound workable in theory, it is ultimately the good will of organizational members and their continuous work on resolving problems as they occur that bring a theoretical model to life.