

Open Organizations, A Framework

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Abstract

This document outlines the Open Organizations Framework.

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1 Status of this Memo

This memo provides information for the Internet community. It does not specify an official standard of any kind, and does not necessarily represent the views of anyone other than its authors. Distribution of this memo is unlimited.

2 Methods and Licensing

This is an early version. Some of the important working practices we subscribe to are those known in computer programming community of Free Software¹: ‘release early, release often’, and ‘given enough eyeballs, all bugs [inconsistencies, shortcomings, etc.] are shallow [easy to spot]’². By requesting your comments we aim to improve aspects that we didn’t have time yet to deal with, that we simple didn’t see or come across. Such practice of public request for comments and joint development is less common when the task involved is to write a text. However, we see our task as an ongoing conversation between practice and theory of organizations, and as such, these papers are not meant to be finished, ever. Since writing mostly involves a final product, stressing this difference is crucial: as the practice evolves, so will the framework and methods used to work on it.

We looked into releasing these documents under the GFDL³ license, but so far couldn’t convince ourselves that such move wouldn’t discourage others from contributing and in that way hinder the collaborative development. Other argument not to do so for now is that the concept of ‘copyright to be able to protect’ is somehow contrary to our thinking. We seek to protect the freedom of anyone to use this framework and documents that describe it without affirming that such freedoms cannot exist, by accepting the concept of copyright. As well, copyright imposes the concept of fixed authorship in the face of law, which in this case would mean accepting and affirming another thoroughly false notion. This framework is about methods as much as it is about the outcome.

3 Introduction: From Practice to Theory and Back

The idea of Open Organizations is one of a framework for the organizations. It aims to represents a set of values. It comes out of practice and, we believe, should continue to be developed through practice. This document is part of a set that starts an ongoing conversation with such practice. As the practice develops, so

¹<http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.html>

²<http://www.tuxedo.org/esr/writings/cathedral-bazaar/cathedral-bazaar/x147.html>

³<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>

will these documents to reflect it. However, exact implementations will vary since we encourage organizations and working groups to use this framework primarily as the starting point, to think about the way (process) they work and organize, rather than as the end point to reach.

4 Discussion: Why Do We Need Evolving Models for Organizations?

The desire and determination not to replicate certain organizational structures and to work in more egalitarian and collaborative environment is what drives us to work on this framework. It comes from our experience that no matter how much we strive to different models using collection of tactics, it is not enough.

Denouncing (rejecting) old paradigms about the ways how to organize and work, but without having anything formalised to replace it, we are stuck in limbo. Our often expressed commitments to autonomy, diversity and inclusiveness, unless captured in new paradigms will most often amount to mere rattling of chains.

We believe that only by changing one's paradigm about the structures of organizations and ways to work does one become free of the old paradigm. Only through constructive action, through the creation, or mere recognition of a new paradigm, can we set ourselves free. That is the main difference between negation and formalized creation. We say 'formalized' since people do create, even while still at paradigms they denounce, but such creation, until recognized in some pattern or model, isn't moulded into a new paradigm and therefore cannot set them free from the paradigm they denounce.

We are here stepping into new direction by formalizing patterns that we recognized within the networks we operate in. The model we're outlining can by no means be the only one, nor suitable to all organizations who subscribe to values that it promotes, but it can be an alternative for some.

In short, to be able to shift paradigms we need models and patterns — we need new to replace the old. Or, to paraphrase D H Lawrence: 'the shout of the non-hierarchical will be just another rattling of chains'.

5 An Open Organization

An Open Organization is described in [Guidelines for Open Organizations](#).

6 Objectives of the Framework

The core objectives of Open Organizations Framework are to promote and enable transparency, inclusiveness (participation), autonomy, recognized interdependency, and diversity. It is important to note that the extent of diversity within an organization directly depends on the extent to which that organization is inclusive, and the extent to which interdependencies are recognized. The more we know about how we depend on each other, the more we can develop what is specific and therefore be more autonomous i.e. diverse.

7 Transparency and Inclusiveness

These two can hardly be discussed separately. The use of publicly archived email lists to work and make decisions means that most information from which decisions are made is available to all involved, and that internal processes of the organization are visible to anyone. This makes the organization accountable to general public (anything can be challenged, since the process and decisions are available) and makes it easier for people to get involved, since they can observe well, and in detail, prior to making the decision. However, this brings up a new paradigm of information overload — too much of it, rather than too little — and the way this is addressed is by writing mandatory summaries. More on this can be found in paper on working groups.

8 Inclusiveness

Inclusiveness is ensured by diversity of working practices and mandatory written summaries. That way people with less time and Internet access can still keep up with the information overload, and broad range of tactics can develop through different methods of organizing and work. Equally important, transparency makes it easy for new people to get an overview of the organization before they decide to join.

9 Autonomy and Recognized Interdependency: accepting diverse tactics

This is the most important concept to understand. One that advocates, and makes possible, high level of autonomy of working groups. Higher autonomy is, more diverse working practices are developed and, as a result of that, more inclusive and

healthy an organization is. It relies on an active approach of recognizing interdependencies within an organization. Our experience showed that when interdependencies aren't thought through, autonomy and individuality suffer immensely from unnecessary limits imposed in the name of the common goal, usually out of concern how different working practices might fragment the organization. These concerns aren't valid ones if looked at from different perspective. On the contrary, it is exactly the idea that we should all work and pursue common goals using a single strategy, a single path, or one set of working practices — it is this idea that imposes superficial collectivism. The results are highly damaging: denial of ourselves and our diverse ways of thinking and being, and thus, it is comparable with the single-minded culture that the capital imposes, the one which we strive to replace. In extreme cases, like capitalism, but with different ideological forces, it can render culture⁴ meaningless. The solution we propose, and present here, is in finding interdependencies. That will allow piece of mind for everyone to pursue diverse approaches towards the agreed objectives. The more clearly interdependencies are recognized the greater the autonomy, and therefore diversity, can be. In short: it is a strategy for ensuring freedoms necessary for diverse tactics to emerge.

An important notion to consider here is that with fast developments of communication and collaboration tools, many different cultures around the globe are coming together to work on common goals. The diversities they possess, now when they are in the process of becoming linked, in global networks and organizations, are under threat. The intention of this framework is to show how those cultures can coexist together, and how calls for unification beyond agreed objectives, as we argued above, are completely unnecessary, damaging and represent superficial thinking which makes organizations closed, exclusive, against diversity and therefore, in the context of networks that the model of Open Organizations is drawn from, prone to fail in the long run. We believe that this framework offers a viable alternative, as we have learned, and continue to learn from the practice.

10 Context

This document is part of a set that describes *The Framework of Open Organizations*:

- [On Cultural Capital: recognition, accessibility and non-scarcity of power](#)
- [Open Organizations: A Framework](#)
- [Guidelines for Open Organizations](#)

⁴see Frederick Jameson: *Postmodernism or the cultural logic of late capitalism*

- [Guidelines for Volunteer Working Groups](#)
- [Guidelines for Online Consensus Decision Making](#)

11 History

Patterns presented here were recognized while working on the [Indymedia](#) network in 2000 and 2001, and then used and drafted into a charter in December 2001 for the [imc-london working group](#). A proposal for [ATTAC London](#) was presented in February 2002, and documented at <http://www.open-organizations.org>.