

Purposes and the Translation of Values into Action

WARREN KINSTON

Brunel Institute of Organisation and Social Studies (BIOSS), Brunel University,
Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH, U.K.

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Abstract—Purpose, a fundamental concept for organized activity and mental functioning, is currently without developed and accepted theory. This paper offers an important component of any practical theory of purpose. The framework has been elaborated and tested in the process of action research. It reveals the structural foundations of purpose to be a five-level hierarchical system whose function is the translation of values into action. The levels (each of which is a form of purpose) are labelled: banner goal, mission, political aim, strategic objective and tactical objective. These levels are defined, their operation illustrated, their expression in social forms described and the relations of the levels to each other clarified. Examples of organizational dysfunction directly attributable to deficiency at each level are provided. Further implications and applications of the theory are suggested, and the limitation of its scope is noted.

INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE underpins all organized activity.* The relation between a person's own purposes and those of any organization to which he belongs have pre-occupied organization theorists [18, 55], organization development workers [7, 8], sociologists [26, 59], social planners [29, 49], policy analysts [48, 80] and economists [12, 68]. The key to sensible managing, planning and evaluation—so management consultants [20, 58], management researchers [19, 52], systems analysts [1, 50] and programme evaluators [16, 79] typically insist—is explicit articulation of objectives. In the design of organizational structure (my own interest), purposes are again held to be primary, and the idea of purpose is taken to be self-evident. Structure should, it is characteristically argued, follow from a clear statement of purposes to be fulfilled [14, 28, 36, 46].

The underlying nature and origin of such goals and goal-oriented activity has become the object of study by axiologists [27, 45], anthropologists [38],

cyberneticians [21, 66], psychobiologists [62], psychologists [35, 51] and philosophers [74, 81]. However, no encompassing, coherent and usable categorical schema or theoretical framework for purpose has yet been developed. In the absence of agreed definitions and theory, a large variety of synonyms for purpose has emerged, each with its own nuance, e.g. end, goal, object, intention, aim, policy, strategy, direction, plan, mandate, objective, results and task.

Textbooks frequently invoke tautologies when attempting to clarify the specification of purposes: "An objective may be defined as any aim or goal ... [or to be more specific] ... an objective is the ... purpose of an organization" [40, p. 273]. More often texts use a two-level classification into goals vs objectives ... or objectives vs goals [5, 11, 63], or purpose vs goals or objectives, the latter two terms then being regarded as synonymous [15]. The former set of purposes have descriptors such as: general, abstract, vague, non-achievable, enduring, widely applicable, high level, ambiguous and non-quantified. These are said to distinguish them from their polar opposites with descriptors such as: specific, low-level, referring to given situations/activities, quantifiable, results of action and time-limited.

Such context-content dichotomies throw up problems when applied to organizations in action. It is then seen that either the definitions do not hold or that each of the two types of purpose unhelpfully conflates apparently distinct sub-types. Thus the goal which set the overall context of the American space effort in the 1960s was not abstract or vague but highly specific and time-limited: to put a man on the moon and return him safely by the end of the decade. And yet there was another overall goal of a different type: to boost national pride. The low level specific objectives also do not seem homogeneous. Simon [72] noted the variety of specific

* Therefore the references which follow in this section can only sample the vast relevant literature.

answers of increasing generality that could be given when the purpose of any activity was examined; and Emery and Trist [25] emphasized the distinction between goals as specific end-points and an equally specific goal defined by prioritising these.

The social science literature, in summary, reveals that purpose is a vital but still unsatisfactorily defined concept. The need for a usable theory of purpose seems undisputable. Whether the general system model of purpose to be described in this paper meets that need must be left for the reader to judge. The aim of my investigation was initially limited to providing useful definitions of the basic notions of purpose required for organized activity, and clarifying these definitions by relating the notions to each other and to aspects of organizational structure and management practice. The model which has emerged, however, appears to have explanatory power beyond these confines.

By way of introduction, the empirical origins of the model will be described and its structure briefly overviewed. The bulk of the paper then follows in two parts, the first describing the model in detail with examples, and the second showing its usefulness for action to resolve organizational dysfunction. The paper concludes with a reference to deeper implications of the theory for social research.

THE ORIGINS OF THE MODEL

The thesis to be presented arose from an ongoing action research programme over nearly twenty years into the organizational structure of the United Kingdom National Health Service (NHS). It has been refined through discussions with colleagues at BLOSS working on problems of structure in a number of fields including business, social welfare, armed forces, the church, and voluntary organizations.

In particular, the theory was generated by recent investigations into the District Health Authority (DHA), a form of governing body or board within the NHS. The DHA is responsible for comprehensive provision of health services in a defined territory with a population of about 250,000. Its responsibility is both legal—it can be sued—and financial—it is allocated an annual budget. The aim of the research was to establish the appropriate work of the DHA, its chairman and members, and to clarify their roles and relations to the Chief Executive Officers and to higher level governance (Regional Health Authorities and the Secretary of State).

In this research, whose methods are described elsewhere [41, 64], we repeatedly came across the use of purposive terms like policy, service objectives, priorities, options, operational planning and strat-

egy-setting. However, we had no precise sense of what was being referred to. Requests for explanation from NHS staff and examination of examples were of little help. A given plan or programme, for example, usually contained a mixture of strongly held values, vague aspirations, specific activities, directions for change, general procedures, methods, rules and self-evident or tautological statements. Time and again in our field and seminar discussions, participants claimed that policies were not being set or were inappropriately set, or were too vague or were too specific, or were not understandable. In confidential discussions, members of Health Authorities expressed puzzlement as to what sort of policy decisions they could realistically make, and Chief Officers revealed confusion as to their own role in developing objectives, and in assisting Authority members to formulate policy.

Over time we came to see that the notion of different *types* of purpose was important. Distinctly different forms of system breakdown could be linked with absence or confusion of different *types*. And attempts at evaluation appeared to be bedevilled by the effect of fundamentally different *types* of purposes relevant to managers, politicians or academics—not just by poor specification or unclarity of objectives.

We realized that there was a good reason why purposes were being given a variety of terms. In organizations, indeed in any organized activity, we found that there were a number of quite discrete articulations of purpose. The situation was confused mainly because investigators in different fields of human endeavour had evolved different labels for similar notions, or the same label for differing notions. Policy analysts sought one variety of purpose while role analysts sought another. Sociologists noted implicit directions while politicians created explicit directives. Lawyers were concerned with formulating objects to justify formation of a social entity, whilst planners were preoccupied with aims which determined its future operation. And so on.

Eventually it emerged that the enormous number of explicit and implicit objectives, and the variety of surface classifications of objectives, were derived from a limited number of *formally distinct and specifiable* categories (or types) of purpose. To ensure organizational coherence, it was clear that suitable categories would have to be interconnected to form a structure or system. If a deep structure of purpose could be clearly articulated, it might serve as a useful framework for organizational analysis and intervention. In studies of social services, a colleague, Jimmy Algie, had already suggested there might be five distinct categories of purpose forming a conceptual hierarchy [3]. The thesis

to be presented here modifies, partially redefines and refines his classification, emphasizes and elaborates its hierarchical structure and develops implications for requisite organizational structure and process. Health services organization will be used as the main example because this is where the theory has been mostly used* ; however, it seems likely that the theory, if correct, is widely applicable.

THE CORE IDEA

The basic proposition is that organized social activity requires exactly five discrete and specific notions of purpose, and that these types of purpose are hierarchically (or contextually) related. In other words, each type of purpose implies and depends on the types at higher and lower levels in the system. The contextual nesting is not merely conceptual. Very different forms of social structure may need to be set up to articulate and implement the different types of purpose; and the hierarchy is reflected in the relationships which exist between these.

The function of the hierarchy is the articulation and promotion of values and their progressive integration with and influence upon actions in the real world. By *values*, † I refer to interests, beliefs, ideals and such-like which constitute the identity and motivating force in individuals. Values act as basic criteria for choice as to what is desirable or worthy. Though values, strictly speaking, are not themselves purposes, they can originate goals and are frequently articulated in terms of goals. By *action*, I refer to any direct alteration of the social or physical world which involves the exercise of power and judgement as to feasibility. Actions, though not themselves purposes, are the embodiment of purpose, and the final common pathway for the realization of values. Purpose is expressed in the act of deciding. Decision may be defined as the application of value to action, and so the system of purposes is also a basic schema for decision-making.

Presumably the hierarchy of purpose evolved to reflect in some fundamental way the relationship between man's inner world of aspirations, aesthetics and ideals and his outer world of action upon people, things and events. The hierarchical theory

emphasises discontinuity in the varieties of purpose; and how in complex organizations the balance of concern between what is desirable and what is feasible necessarily changes as one moves towards implementation.

The main features of the model are summarized in Table 1. Given the existing confusion of terms, labelling is difficult. I have therefore followed Algie [3], and have indicated in Table 1 the usual synonyms. General labels like goal, purpose, aim and objective have been used to cover all notions and I will follow this convention. At times it will be convenient to refer to a level with numerical notation: e.g. 'L-4 (i.e. Level 4) purposes' for 'mission'.

THE DEPTH STRUCTURE OF PURPOSIVE ACTION

The whole model may be introduced by running through the levels to demonstrate the fundamental proposition that the hierarchy is about the orderly translation of values into action.

L-5 purposes or *banner goals* specify a value consensus within a given social group and therefore are not institutionally-tied. For example, an L-5 goal of a hospital is to ensure that a sick person will receive adequate care, but that is not very different from the goal of a mother looking after an ill child. While the motives or values of individuals cannot determine the exact nature of an institution, no institution can exist (or would be allowed to exist) if it did not embody such aims. To determine precisely what defines institutions or organizations as such, we must move down a level.

L-4 purposes or *missions* also serve to ensure value consensus, but now solely within the organization, and adherence to these purposes is a characteristic of membership. For example, if the mission of a hospital included providing accident and emergency services, then all individuals working within the hospital, whatever their job, would need to agree on, commit themselves to and accept the consequences of holding this goal.

L-5 and L-4 purposes should be relatively stable over time because rapid change either precludes formation of an organization or results in its disruption. The remaining three levels, by contrast, contain purposes which are directly and deliberately concerned to bring about changes and are themselves subject to substantial or rapid change as circumstances and values alter. Wherever there is change there will be choice and where there is choice there is a potential for conflict and tension. The tension at L-3 is between different values, at L-2 between values and action and at L-1 between different courses of action.

* A detailed application of the model to District Health Authorities in the British National Health Service (NHS) has been published as a Working Paper for NHS staff and DHA members [44].

† Formally, a value is simply an amount of preference or weight, i.e. an attributed property [43], assigned to a particular option for action or reason for action, not the option or reason itself. But common usage mixes the two. The formal definition is of practical use at Levels 3 and below; however, detailed discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper.

Table 1. Summary of the hierarchical system of purpose

Level	Label	Synonym*	Brief description	Ideal format	Value-action position	Groupings of levels	Social form
5	Banner goal	Philosophy ; value ; ideal ; fundamental objective ; symbolic policy.	Purposes which express prime values taken to be widely held	'We all believe in and want to ...'	Value consensus beyond any defined organization	Levels of stability (consensus)	'Spontaneous groupings e.g. petitioners, interest group ('proto-organizations'). An organization e.g. formally constituted association, company, public agency
4	Mission	Object ; general aims ; primary task ; terms of reference.	Purposes which define the basic identity and hence prime tasks and membership of an organized body	'This firm/agency/ association/ department has been set up to ...'	Value consensus within the organization		
3	Political aim	Policy ; priority.	Purposes which lay down preferred foci or concerns amongst competing equally valid possibilities for the organization.	'The important thing is to reduce/attack/ improve/ignore/ concentrate on ...'	Value/value conflict within the organization	Levels of choice and change (conflict)	A governing body e.g. board, public authority, steering group.
2	Strategic objective	Policy ; strategic aim.	Purposes which orient actions and define the real world for the organization. They lead to the development of strategies which have a broadly defined time-scale	'The situation/ need/problem/ opportunity as we see it is X and over the coming months/year(s) we need to Y.' (X = direction of work : Y = the strategy)	Value/action conflict within the organization		
1	Tactical objective	Task objective ; operational objective.	Purposes which indicate a finite result to be achieved within some finite period of time and may be finely specified	'A is to be done by B.' (A = specified project/task ; B = time deadline)	Action/action conflict within the organization	Levels of implementation	Executant(s) e.g. employee hierarchy, workers, executives.

* Note: This column illustrates the more common synonyms found in the literature. Certain terms are used in all levels: aim, objective, goal, purpose.

L-3 purposes or political aims are still primarily matters of value and serve to orient the organization in the real world of impinging problems and attractive possibilities. Hence values now require to be expressed as priorities linked to resource allocation; that is to say, some implicit or explicit quantification is essential and inevitable [cf. footnote † p. 149]. *L-2 purposes* concern the translation of *L-3* value preferences into a practical direction for the enterprise. It seems appropriate to label this level *strategic*. Stated *L-2* goals carry assumptions as to the nature of the existing situation and define what is generally needed and feasible. Such an open definition of the real world still leaves the need to specify purposes in the form of practical tasks. These *L-1 purposes or tactical objectives* are the final channel for action.

The model just outlined provides a coherent and consistent language for the clarification of objectives, indicates how and where change should be brought about in organizations, and helps to place values as a significant and driving force in management processes. It therefore purports to be more than an elegant academic classification—a theory to be espoused [6]—but claims validation from its practical usefulness and substantial explanatory power. We now move on to discuss each level in more detail: to offer definitions and further description, to note differences in formulation and legitimization, and to identify institutional structures requisitely associated with each level. Two caveats are perhaps called for. First, although our exposition of the model necessarily proceeds systematically, we do not suggest that the real world does or should operate in such an orderly fashion [39, 47]. Second, the numbers attached to the levels have significance but do not mean that any level is intrinsically better, more important, more difficult or whatever than any other level.

Level 5: banner goals

Banner goals refer to purposes which transcend discrete areas of social activity. Such goals or purposes will therefore be found outside the boundaries of any organization under consideration. Banner goals are interests and motivations rooted in deeply felt beliefs, ideals and fundamental values. They are usually, but not necessarily, widely shared. They may be grand abstractions ('to allow diversity of choice' or 'to develop human potential') or may sound quite specific ('to care for the sick' or 'to maintain the safety of the streets').

Within an organization, banner goals constitute the philosophical framework and the value context for the mission. They socially and humanly justify and legitimize the organization's existence and survival. Banner goals are typically specified in the

founding documents of an organization as part of the rationale for its creation. They are meant to be vitalizing and inspirational, to serve as a rallying cry for joint effort and to be widely applicable. Therefore they also appear in significant speeches, press releases and other morale-boosting exercises within the organization and without. This type of goal generates much of the necessary motivation, goodwill and cooperation required within and without any organization if it is to survive and grow.

Banner goals enable an organization to find its place in the wider social environment and to link up or negotiate with other organizations. Similarly, members use them to harmonize their work-life with their life outside the organization. This is because banner goals may exist external to or prior to formally established organization. Indeed, the label is a useful reminder that such purposes may be written on banners, placards, or posters used to express the desires and beliefs of popular movements, crusades, pressure groups and lobbies. Such groupings of people tend to be unbounded. The groupings are a recognizable part of society as a whole, but the boundary between the two is vague and poorly defined and membership of the group is not an issue.

Banner goals are held to be self-evidently valuable to those involved; and disagreement with them seems deeply mistaken, unreasonable or even perverse. At this level practical debate is avoided if at all possible and any value that might be socially useful is proclaimed. Thus a firm may, without cynicism, espouse the desire both 'to reduce unnecessary costs' and 'to provide jobs', irrespective of whether it cuts jobs to reduce costs, or allows overmanning to avoid strikes.

Banner goals are often proclaimed in a flourish of rhetoric and may seem to be very distant from implementation. However, such purposes are the ultimate justification for any activity and the ultimate integrating force in society. Reluctance to specify them and debate action in such terms fragments, de-emotionalizes and de-personalizes work. All human perception and action is impregnated with and modified by values, and *L-5* goals therefore need to infuse activity associated with all subsequent levels, making work intrinsically meaningful and socially justifiable.

Banner goals may influence specifications profoundly insofar as they may lead to decisions (constraints) which go without saying. For example, if "it's a man's life in the Army", then there will be no women five-star Generals. Focus on banner goals may also contribute to re-thinking action; for example, through the construction of utopian scenarios. However, it is impossible to produce substantial change or make significant amounts of

money without some form of specified organization. For example, petitions to Government are notoriously ineffective no matter how many signatories, and spontaneous complaints by workers in a firm often have little effect on management. Taken alone therefore, banner goals may seem vacuous: truisms without substance, an easy option to avoid hard choices, noise without action. If impact is really desired, it is necessary to move down the hierarchy and articulate a different sort of purpose.

Level 4: missions

Missions refer to purposes which mark off or bound segments of organized activity. They therefore enable social identification of an autonomous entity. The mission, sometimes called 'objects' or 'general aims' of an organization, consists of a set of stable objectives which envisage or point to a desired state of affairs in the organization taken as a whole.

Missions define or give an identity to social organizations, hence they may be, and often must be, embodied in publicly available documents—legislation, a constitution or charter, articles of association, mission statements or similar. The mission statements themselves, or changes in mission, are requisitely agreed and sanctioned where possible by the body defined by the mission. For a firm, this will be the company shareholders; for voluntary organizations, the formally constituted association of members; for public agencies, the legislature sanctions on behalf of the body public.

A mission is the first practical and organized step towards implementation of banner goals. A mission must relate sufficiently to wider social reality, and be well enough formulated to obtain the agreement and commitment of individuals. Mission statements define the boundary of the organization; and hence determine the organization's membership, and clarify and stabilize its distinctiveness from the social environment. It follows that definition and pursuit of the mission will be the basis of leadership in organizations [71]. Members must commit time, money or effort, and so the mission is a source of important motivation for the efforts of members—indeed it may be one of the main reasons why they are in the organization. The identity of individuals locks in to the identity of the organization and joining or leaving are often events of much social and emotional significance.

The mission statement, 'the business we are in', the *'raison d'être'* of the organization, legitimizes and acts as the terms of reference for more detailed lower-level objectives. Implications for action that emerge from the mission typically define the organi-

zation in a fundamental way. The mission might specify (or clearly imply), for example, general personnel requirements, the level of impact desired, some technical approach to be used, or a type of programme. The 'man on the moon' mission mentioned earlier is an example of such specification.

Organizations are usually not allowed by law to be set up, or at least to operate formally in the social realm, without some L-4 specification. To enable such specifications to last, they are deliberately drawn broadly. For example, the 1946 NHS Act stated that the aim of the NHS was to promote "the establishment of a comprehensive health service designed to secure improvement in the physical and mental health of the people . . . and the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of illness" [30]. This was enough to set the NHS up but not enough to clarify important aspects of its ongoing operation. From its sense of the essence of the NHS, the Royal Commission investigating the NHS in the late 1970s therefore offered more specific mission statements including: to provide a broad range of services to a high standard; to provide equality of access to these; services to be free at the time of use; and so on [67]. However, even the broadest L-4 objectives are less general than banner goals because they must indicate what staff in the NHS are or should expect to be doing and often what resource levels are needed.* Each purpose within the mission stands on its own, a defining characteristic, without implying comparison with alternative purposes. Different L-4 purposes would, in effect, have created a different organization.

Establishing the mission is important for action, but clearly not enough on its own. From the outset, it becomes clear that there are very many, indeed too many, possible and desirable ways to forward the mission; and there is never enough money, people or time to do everything [22]. It becomes necessary, therefore, to make choices between equally legitimate possibilities for organizational action.

Level 3: political aims

Political aims refer to purposes which lay down one of any set of alternative and hence competing directions or foci of interest and concern within the accepted mission. They are the primary orienting statements guiding operations in the system of

* The Secretariat of the Royal Commission also identified a 'fundamental overall objective' for the NHS: "to contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of the individual and the enhancement of his capacity to use his abilities to the greatest possible extent" [69]. This is a recognizable banner goal, applicable to education services, good neighbour groups, family life and much else, as well as the NHS. It did not appear in the final report [67].

implementation and are sometimes termed 'policies' or 'priorities'. They may be long-term, or they may rapidly shift in line with changing fashions or circumstances. Because such goals primarily indicate differences of value, they lend themselves to polarization.

The L-3 purpose may affirm a legitimate expectation, or involve a re-focussing of operations, or be a re-interpretation of the mission. It can usually be expressed in simple terms, and does not require deep appreciation of real world complexities. Richard Nixon, then U.S. President, epitomized the formulation of political aims when asked his position on a particular crisis of the Italian lira. His reported statement, "I don't give an expletive deleted for the Italian lira", expressed an unambiguous sense of importance, and left the experts to deal with the situation.

Whereas agreement on purposes at L-4 may be assumed and built on to develop morale, at L-3 disagreement and contention are to be expected. Political aims therefore appear as focal points for debates and, in their nature, generate controversy. Even if such choices and debates do not flow from the mission as such, they are inevitably thrown up by the system of implementation where problems emerge as an 'issue' requiring a choice one way or the other. The choice is recognized as primarily a matter of value rather than being decidable on the basis of evidence, information or professional expertise. The language is that of priorities and preferences and, inevitably, someone or some group loses out. Should more attention be given to child-care or care of the elderly? Should the city site its new market on commercial or residential land? Should the firm encourage its managers to stay local or to move about? Should a university's academics be expected to concentrate on student teaching or to take on a wider educational role in society? And so on. In public life and publicly funded services, open debate on such issues is accepted as important. By contrast, in firms, in professional or academic organizations, and in voluntary associations, "power and politics are dirty words" [82].

The controversial aspects of political purposes may result in the formation of temporary or long-lived factions or cliques committed to particular sides of the policy debate [61]. Such factionalism may be sterile or it may be constructive; but bringing debate into the open is usually preferable to papering over deep divisions of opinion. Should feelings run high enough, a faction may desire to forward its own values more systematically. This means departing and setting up a competing or specialized firm, agency or association with its own distinctive (L-4) constitution and (L-5) values. Left-wing political parties, some religions and psycho-

analytic institutions seem particularly prone to such splits [77].

Political decisions need to be handled authoritatively. Such responsibility is requisitely taken on by a relative small body with power over the executive. This body—usually known as a board, governing body, or authority—is appointed by the original constituting body. It operates with a voting system, implicit or explicit, though occasionally decisions may be referred to larger representative groups, or even the total membership via referenda. Though political issues requisitely call for decision or approval by the board, their recognition and articulation may be a task for the top executive.

Governance is sited at a crucial nexus: the lowest level of purpose responsible for articulating value and the highest level of purpose responsible for producing change in operations. A board therefore requires certain tools over and above the power to set L-3 policies if it is to function effectively: in particular, the power of appointment and dismissal of top management, the power to approve strategic objectives and in public agencies the power to sanction the budget.

As an example of L-3 purposes, we may consider developments in European health services over the past forty years [10]. The emphases (in chronological order) have been: to provide access for patients to physicians; to build hospitals and develop hospital care; to provide services for neglected groups; to improve management; to control medical manpower; to contain costs; and to develop care in the community. The political status of these issues is revealed first by the radical changes in emphasis: at one time focussing on hospitals, later focussing on non-hospital care; at one time increasing available finance, at another attempting to reduce it; and second by the controversy surrounding most of the initiatives. Some policies are more obviously ideological and controversial than others, a current example being the present U.K. Government's aim to contract out ('privatize') various hotel services within NHS hospitals.

Coming down on one side or another of an issue and allocating money, difficult though this may be, in itself makes no impact. The question still remains as to 'what *can* be done' [24]. Consideration of options for action takes us to the levels of implementation.

Level 2: strategic objectives

Strategic objectives refer to purposes which set a direction for the enterprise in the real world so as to ensure maximum impact with the available resources. The current situation must be appraised and the essential nature of needs or problems and possible responses to them must be decided; all

in the light of articulated L-3 preferences, the L-4 mission and accepted L-5 banner goals. In other words, before purposes can become fully linked to the real world as specific plans or tasks to be done (L-1 purposes), there is a need for guidance as to the nature of that world and orientation within it. Strategic objectives therefore, implicitly or explicitly [53], interpret the world inside and outside of the organization by saying what approach is or is not 'realistic', and telling those involved about 'the way things are' and 'where we are going'.

All levels thus far have been purely ends-based; the means of implementation has required moving down a level to yet another end. At Level 2 (and Level 1) it becomes possible to speak of means (or plans) in the same breath as ends. Sets of purposes and means which together progressively lead to a realization of the L-2 objective constitute the strategy or strategic plan (or programme). Because the real world does not automatically bend itself to an organization's desires, the strategy will often involve deviation from existing ways of doing things. As a result, the time frame of significant strategies is usually not less than one year, and may extend over a number of years, and in governments or very large organizations possibly up to 50 years. Strategic objectives therefore operate within a broadly conceived time-scale, their pursuit being identified and evaluated in terms of a general rate of progress—not by pre-specified measures or performance targets.

Strategic objectives may be based on facts, but can never be simply determined by them. Things like needs, problems or appropriate responses to these are not uncontestable givens. For example the real world includes the economic environment, world trends, alterations in markets, technological developments, shifts in government, attitudes of higher authorities, the mood of the work-force, reactions by competing organizations and so on. However, it is frequently unclear whether such matters are significant to the matter in hand; and, even if clearly significant, it is never certain what their exact nature will be, how they will impact on the organization and what degree of confidence can be placed on any appraisal. Strategic objectives that appear to flow logically from data are therefore suspect. Data are necessary, but data are selected and collected using assumptions or desired definitions as to the nature of things; assumptions underlie necessary analysis of the data; and the integration of data and data analyses into a coherent whole picture is itself a matter of definition. Information is often used to hide the assumptive (or reality-defining) quality of the strategic objective. For example, in the U.K. coal industry, the strategic objective of 'closing

uneconomic pits' led to a year-long strike by miners (1984–1985). The facts and figures put forward by the National Coal Board appeared convincing and most debate either asserted or contradicted these 'facts'. However, a large number of assumptions—about the operation of pits, about the coal industry and about energy needs of the country—are buried in the facts and figures [23]; different assumptions would have led to a different strategic objective.

Because deciding strategic choices requires immersion in the complexities of the real world, mobilization of available resources, and intervention in the flow of real world processes, expertise and experience are essential. The responsibility for formulation of strategy therefore lies naturally with the top executive. This is confirmed etymologically—the root of the term coming from the Greek for 'office or command of a general' (OED). However, the board needs, at the very least, to retain sanctioning power: first, because in the absence of strategies, L-3 political aims are unlikely to lead to much; second, because strategies need to be checked for consistency with other existing L-3 aims; and third, because L-2 strategies worth their salt throw up new L-3 policy issues.

L-2 purposes share with L-3 purposes a concern to affect the organization as a whole without necessarily being comprehensive in scope. As indicated earlier, political choices on their own appear weak and unconvincing and therefore typically call for the articulation of associated strategic objectives and strategies. The term policy is often used ambiguously to cover both these types of purpose. However, a clear distinction exists. For example, turning again to the European L-3 health service policies which were so similar from country to country, we may note that the L-2 policies for pursuing these varied greatly depending on the particular health care system and social circumstances. For example, the L-3 political concern to develop hospitals and hospital care was pursued in the U.K. by the strategy of national ownership, in France by developing private profit-making hospitals and in the Netherlands by development of non-profit voluntary hospitals.

The strategic objective, even with its strategy, still floats above immediate specific action. It needs to be followed by detailed tasks or operational plans, and this brings us to the final level in the purpose hierarchy.

Level 1: tactical objectives

Tactical objectives refer to the purposes of specific practical tasks or projects. Time is no longer just a guideline but the prime framework for action. Tasks are always set, implicitly or explicitly, with deadlines, end-points or targets [36]. L-1 purposes

are therefore scheduled short to middle range goals—as short as one day or less, no longer than 5–10 years—and are directly linked to a means of achievement.

L-1 objectives are part of a programme of action in which are included specific sub-objectives, specific resource allocations, specific times, specific places, specific methods and specific results. The concern moves from doing the right thing, to doing the thing right. Despite this, work is personal and involves the use of judgement, so no two individuals would do the same task in exactly the same way. Concrete detailing of the tactical objectives, including its sub-objectives and related programmatic specifications, may be taken as far as relevant or desired. Hence these objectives are referred to as 'the nuts and bolts of the scheme', focussing here is 'getting down to brass tacks', and work is said to be 'at the sharp end'.

Such purposes are articulated and carried out within the executive structure which is frequently, but not invariably, built on some form of managerial hierarchy. Major requirements of any such executive programme include rapid and effective resolution of conflicts between equally acceptable ways of achieving the same end result; and ensuring that necessary L-1 purposes are not omitted or duplicated. The need to assign responsibilities to ensure that time-targetted objectives and sub-objectives within L-1 are met without such problems has led Jaques [36] to identify another structure within L-1, the hierarchy of 'levels of work' based on differing time-scales.*

Because tactical objectives refer to specific easily identifiable end-points for given concrete situations, they are ideal for establishing hierarchies of objectives; and hence for progressing, monitoring and evaluating work [34].

VARIETIES OF ORGANIZATION

Purpose underlying action has been presented as a unitary system, meaningfully subdivisible into a five-level hierarchy. This model should be applicable to all organizations, to any coherent decision-making section within an organization, and to individuals [35]. Thus organized subgroups of an enterprise will need to have their (sub-)missions, which describe the functions or general responsibilities of the section. For example, in the U.K.'s NHS, a District Health Authority is the

primary legal entity and it has a mission, but its hospitals have their (sub-)mission, and departments like pathology laboratories or physiotherapy services have their (sub-sub-)missions, and so on down to posts for individuals. Nested within each of these missions will be level 3, level 2 and level 1 purposes. The last are overt, while L-3 and L-2 purposes operate implicitly reflecting vested interests of the sub-sections. These implicit goals need to be recognized and understood at higher levels, as they shape the activities and outcomes of organizational efforts [17, 21, 59, 61].

As in the last paragraph, much of the discussion in the paper takes as its organizational model the NHS, a large complex public service in which the L-5 purposes are social values, and in which management carries out integrated planning and reports to publicly controlled governing bodies. It seems likely, however, that the model applies to other varieties of organization, and perhaps gives a useful slant on their particular characteristics [32, 54].

It appears, for example, that the successful entrepreneur can build an organization based forcefully around his own values (L-5), and can articulate a clear mission (L-4) and equally easily alter it. He can deal rapidly with controversy over political aims (L-3) by removing those who disagree with him, and therefore has substantial power in implementing bold long-term comprehensive strategies (L-2). By contrast, in organizations which are essentially conglomerates of project groups (Mintzberg's 'ad hoc-racies'), although values may be a powerful cohesive force, the mission is frequently weak, political issues are lengthily debated, and strategy tends to be disjointed and subordinated to environmental demands. Organizations of professionals can be seen to differ again. Here the group values generate an unproblematic mission, but the independence of members demands painstaking individual negotiations on contentious issues and strategic options.

The analysis can be extended even more widely. If, as conjectured, the schema applies generally to any coherent viable human system, then it ought to be applicable to decision-making in everyday life. A moment's reflection reveals this to be the case. For example, given that a break from work is a good thing (L-5), and you want to go on holiday this year (L-4), then there are choices as to the type of holiday—beach, skiing, walking (L-3). Once a preference, say for the beach, is stated, different options exist depending on how the actual event is imagined and on practical factors like expected weather, finance and time (L-2). You will need to decide between, perhaps, a touristy beach, an isolated beach, or a beach with sightseeing nearby. When this is sorted out, you can choose a specific resort and make all detailed arrangements (L-1). Of

* A theoretically associated decision-making hierarchy, based on type of output or response to need, is provided by Rowbottom and Billis [65]. Their formulation therefore indicates a hierarchical ordering within L-4. Insofar as Jaques is concerned with generally expected timescales of work in jobs, his levels are mission-based too.

course, in practice, these steps are not explicitly and rigidly followed in a particular order.

APPLICATION TO ORGANIZATIONAL DYSFUNCTION

Having reviewed the theory of purpose level-by-level and as a whole, we can now turn in more detail to its practical import. For the moment, therefore, we may put aside questions about the status of the theory and whether it does indeed tap deeply into human and social reality. Experience in the field indicates that the theory can be used as a strategic framework for thinking about organizational dysfunction. The theory is not a blueprint or rule-book which determines how people or organizations should make decisions or specify objectives, it only argues that purposive action has a deep structure which, *if necessary*, can be teased out and made explicit. As the theory emerged from work on solving practical problems, it is proposed that such explication will be useful at times.

Purposes may be the source of organizational dysfunction in many ways: they may be absent, unrealistically devised, poorly formulated, poorly communicated, poorly understood, confused with rules or methods and so on. Such pathology has been frequently treated in the literature. It is worth mentioning, however, that although task objectives and missions have long been assigned significance, only lately has it become fashionable to emphasize strategic objectives [73] and values [60]. Political aims still await their day. The theory was induced partly from characteristic patterns of deficiency in organizations and patterns related to each level will now be described and illustrated with examples.

If the *banner goals* are not alive and widely subscribed to, then morale withers and apathy and a sense of futility develops, undermining specific practical efforts.

e.g. Problems of nurse management were recognized in a mental hospital after an incident of maltreatment had been reported in the local press. A request was made to the author to assist with devising a better management structure. However, after interviews with ward nurses, it became clear that neglect of the patient was part of a much wider neglect. The Health Authority had invested neither money nor interest in the institution. The facilities were poorly decorated and overcrowded. Medical staff were few and rarely in evidence. Other ancillary staff posts (like occupational therapists) had been vacant for a long time. A variety of corrupt practices such as dishonest signing on and theft were known to occur and were tolerated. There was a general sense that no-one cared about the staff or the patients and that this was going to continue. Clearly, in this situation, improvement in the management of the hospital was not in itself going to solve these problems. Indeed, first-rate nurse managers would avoid such an institution. The major problem seemed to be a lack of any determined commitment by the authority and top management that "we care and want to care about the mentally ill". An *explicit and public statement with high media coverage*, rather than a review of management structure, would have been

more appropriate as a first step. As it was, the staff in post were aware of the lack of any deep desire for change, which probably reflected general attitudes to the mentally ill in society.

If there is not a clear *mission*, or such statements as do exist are out of date, then the organization lacks terms of reference for its operation and has difficulty in developing its 'distinctive competence' [71] or in surviving. Departments or other sub-sections of an organization whose functions are unclear will therefore be a continuous drain on the whole. If the entire organization is weak at this level, it will meander vaguely in the social stream inappropriately following different paths of development until it loses its way and is crowded out by more determined competitors; in a grant-aided institution, the consequence may be progressive fragmentation, inability to recruit staff and loss of morale.

e.g. An interdisciplinary research institute in a medical school was set up and led by a powerful director for many years. He not only brought in the majority of the finance but impressed his own distinctive vision on the conception of what the institute was there for. Members of the institute largely accepted his interests and methods, and those who differed substantially left. When the director retired, the medical school had a problem because, while it valued interdepartmental collaboration, it had no defined commitment to the institute as a separate structure. An acting director was designated but no new director appointed, and the various small groups of researchers felt leaderless. Pressure on the institute to close down was resisted by the members who still desired to work within an interdisciplinary structure. However, they now lacked a unified sense of exactly what the institute should be doing—what was within its remit and what without—and no higher body felt able or willing to take on this responsibility. As a result differing lines of research began to proliferate, and a variety of new links with outside agencies were set up. Each subgroup had to work hard to devise its own mission which harmonized but could not intermesh with those of others. No-one, however, could draw on the total strength of the institute. The sense of a collective purpose weakened and negotiations with the environment became largely reactive. Inevitably the medical school decided to close down the institute as a distinct entity despite objections from the members and their continuing (indeed increasing) receipt of funds. Members, with their funds, were expected to move to various departments or to leave the medical school.

Absence of needed *political aims* results in endless overt or covert struggles to determine where effort and resources should go. In such circumstances any decision, resolutely pursued, may be better than none. An implication of the theory presented is that clear legal recognition of the right of boards to determine political aims is both sensible and feasible, and would prevent prolonged stalemates which benefit nobody, as in the following example.

e.g. The executive director of a housing foundation, whose mission was to provide housing for the unemployed, wanted to do this by setting up cooperative work arrangements. The trustees, however, believed that an individual's work plans should not be restricted. This issue, should on-site cooperative ventures be made mandatory or not, was essentially a matter of values—either approach could be successfully implemented

and no information or evidence could decide the matter. The difference of opinion between board and executive directors was not resolved and, because the director had a long-term contract while the trustees provided the funds, the foundation was thereafter able to accomplish very little [76].

Boards, whether in business or non-profit organizations, are notorious for poor adherence to their required role [5, 13, 33, 56]. In the absence of board leadership, the executive or professionals will take major decisions without concern for controversial and emotive issues likely to affect the longer term future of the enterprise. In firms, this usually manifests as excessive focus on financial indicators of success [57, Ch. 12] rather than on a deep understanding of the business and how it might develop. In public services it usually results in an unfortunate acceptance of professional ideologies. For example, health policies in many developing countries have been excessively influenced by doctors to the detriment of the general population [70, 75]. In the NHS, we have been concerned to clarify with authority (board) members, management and doctors just how their roles should complement each other.

e.g. Chief executive officers frequently complain that they have to make work to keep their authority members busy, and that members interfere with officer decisions. Members, for their part, complain of not being presented with options to decide on. Officers then complain about the lack of members' appreciation of NHS complexities, and present them with massive documents and statistical tables. Lay members are, not unnaturally, uncertain as how to contribute in such a context and feel impotent, confused, manipulated and suspicious. Their decision-making feels like rubber-stamping.

The way to relieve such a paranoia-generating situation between boards and their chief executives is to make both groups aware that there are always controversial issues which require to be ruled upon—if the organization is not to be based solely on bureaucratic or professional values. Ruling on such issues feels like 'real work' to the board members. Officers must produce documents which draw out the key value issue(s) in the matter under consideration. Such documents must be short, often less than a page, and some indication of the strategic options which flow from each side of the issue may be included. In our experience in public services, board members then feel useful and chief executives find such policy rulings helpful for planning and for gaining cooperation from professional staff and subordinates.

Lack of *strategic objectives* and an associated strategy results in the organization making a weak disorganized impact. The absence of L-2 purpose is why so many policies do not get implemented. Money is frequently allocated by government agencies or charitable foundations on the assumption that it can be spent simply and directly. This is probably the exception rather than the rule.

e.g. The government desired to bridge the gap in provision between prison hospitals and psychiatric hospitals in the NHS. A decision was made to build medium secure units throughout the country and about £20 million provided. Several years later only one unit had been built and much of the money had been diverted to other projects. No one was held responsible.

Absence of explicit strategic objectives may not be as blatant as in the above example, because often plans are made (at Level 1) and these carry implicit (or emergent) assumptions. This is the most common failing of 'abstract' or 'shelf' planning. By contrast, real planning which is part of implementation must include examination of assumptions as to real world compliance, and must specify ways of dealing with the world's characteristic refusal to fit in with political initiatives.

e.g. A health authority was persuaded of the value of health centres for the use of family doctors as a way of pursuing its policy of emphasizing preventive and community care. The authority was advised to provide capital for buildings, to staff the centre with community nurses and other professionals, and to provide upkeep costs. Impressive statistical detail backed up these proposals, including norms for attendances and figures for the beneficial effect on patients who attended at similar facilities elsewhere. The plans, within their own specific compass, could not be faulted, and the authority sanctioned building and staff recruitment. Unfortunately, some years later the authority was faced with unused facilities—because the family doctors in this district had never been inclined to cooperate. This had not been highlighted and no resources had been put aside to gain their support. Unsurprisingly their attitudes had not changed despite the large expense incurred.

Interorganizational initiatives frequently come to grief because of the inability of the separate organizations to agree on a common strategy. Each organization is happy to accept the funds which go with carrying out various tasks such as building facilities or employing staff; however, they wish to retain their own perceptions (assumptions, definitions) of the situation. Resolving such matters would generate conflict and potentially put receipt of funds in jeopardy, but avoidance is liable to mean certain and total failure. Greer and Rozas [31] have described in painful detail the failure of a U.S. foundation's multi-million dollar attempt to assist integrated provision of health services for the underprivileged. After the money was spent the patients would not come and the professionals would not agree on how those who did should be handled. Money was poured in (appropriately) to support a political initiative, but money by itself does not make things happen; some top executive-type body does, and its crucial role is to ensure that conflict at the strategic level is resolved and obstacles to social impact are circumvented.

If *tactical* or *task objectives* are not properly set, then work simply may not get done or it will be done incorrectly, inefficiently or inappropriately.

e.g. A hospital administrator was sent a memo asking for a report 'as soon as convenient' on the quality of catering with details of recent changes. The following week when asked for it, he explained that he was waiting for the budget figures. As the committee which needed the report was to meet that day, the issue of catering had to be postponed a month. Worried by the apparent slur on his performance, he produced a 60-page document. But this was unusable by the committee which required a 3-page outline focussing on the purchase of new equipment. Again the item was held over for a month to await his revision. This time the report was accepted.

L-1 objectives may not be specified at all or there may be conflicting specifications. This usually stems from incoherent role definitions, absence of assigned responsibility, or duplication of responsibility. Schemes such as management by objectives attempt to minimize such problems, but structural deficiencies in organizations may be so severe as to resist such procedural approaches.

Sometimes not just one but several levels of purpose may be omitted. For example, in voluntary associations, we have noticed a tendency for groups to move directly from the reassuring and comforting work of devising a mission (L-4) to deciding on immediately satisfying concrete action (L-1). The mission statement enhances morale and feelings of group cohesion, and the tasks reinforce this with a sense of achievement and group effectiveness. However, sooner or later, the undiscussed, unresolved and contentious political and strategic issues push through. Because controversy and conflict are disliked, specific structural and procedural arrangements are not geared to handling the debate and taking the necessary decisions. Textbooks presenting the dichotomized goal/objective model of objectives are in danger of propagating this pathology.

e.g. Anthony and Herzlinger [5: p. 230-1] advocate the dichotomous model and use the programs and objectives of a Baptist church as one of their examples. The programs, as stated, are classic mission statements: e.g. 'to proclaim the Gospel to all people' and 'to promote worship'. However there is a sense of incongruity in moving from such broad goals to purposes like: 'to establish a church evangelism committee by 15 April' and 'to involve all institutionalized (elderly and otherwise) members in regular church worship by 1 June'. Unless this is an unusually united or apathetic church, there will surely be differences of opinion on how 'all people' should be interpreted, disagreements on the different approaches to persuading members to worship, and differing views on which institutions can realistically be approached.

Another common problem arises from confusion between levels. Banner goals may be presented as strategic or misused as a mission, tactical objectives may be treated as if political or be made to stand in for strategic objectives, strategic objectives may be labelled alterations in the mission or substituted for political choices, and so on. We have been particularly struck by the tendency for policy docu-

ments, ostensibly at L-3, L-2 or L-1, to be packed with L-5 statements. These confusions obscure real agreements and disagreements, prevent reasoned discussion and lead people to act inappropriately. The multiple permutations and combinations of logical and practical errors are the very reason why our understanding of purpose has been so poor. Disentangling them is fascinating—the reader is encouraged to test out his feeling for the theory by applying the schema to an organization he knows well.

CONCLUSION

Purpose needs to be recognized not just as respectable in social science, but as one of its fundamental particles. It therefore deserves a theory which is simple to understand, practically useful, true to its empirical base, rich in implications, and personally meaningful. It should have connections with theories of both individual mental functioning and social organization. The theoretical framework offered potentially meets these requirements, and it is hoped to explore its ramifications in further papers. In particular, it is necessary to clarify the hierarchies which exist within the various levels.

To put the theory into perspective, it is necessary here to note its main limitation. The concern throughout has been with the foundations on which a system's purposes need to be built—in other words the framework offered is part of *teleostatics*. Existing methods for improving the process of determining and developing objectives [4, 78] are not undermined and are likely to benefit from applying the classification and appreciating its implications. However, the theory of the pursuit of objectives, *teleodynamics*, is still largely unexplored. Teleodynamic conceptions, like 'vision', require to be more rigorously and practically defined and located within an appropriate complementary theory. Research in this area is currently underway at the Brunel Institute.

The hierarchical theory has been developed as a result of deep immersion in the problems and issues of organizing social activity and is offered as one that begins to do justice to social complexity. Although the approach was pragmatic, the underlying epistemology is analytical. The model will therefore appeal insofar as its assumptions are intuitively self-evident and its propositions are judged to hang together consistently and coherently [42]. The theory is open to empirical testing, and the findings have been presented in a way which may encourage discovery of errors of concept or fact. Such testing has taken place, albeit mainly in the NHS and in the context of organizational pathology. Repeatedly it has been found that five

levels suffice, and that less than five omits or confuses types of purpose which for practical purposes, such as determining resource allocation or assigning responsibilities, need to be recognized and kept separate.

It is proposed that the system is not merely one of a number of convenient taxonomies, but rather that it plugs into the fundamental nature of human and social purposeful action. In this regard, it would seem that there may be deeper reasons for the existence of a five-level hierarchical system: Beer [9] has suggested that this is a property of all viable socially-created systems, and Jaques *et al.* [37] have suggested that it may be a property of the mind.

Each level is viable in that it has its own logic, its own social structures, and its own constituency. So activities whose rationale is based on purpose (like program evaluation) may benefit from preparatory analysis using this theoretical framework. Significantly for social research, each level appears to have an affinity with one or more social science disciplines. This may explain why the total system has not been previously recognized. The relation of different social science disciplines to differing levels of the purposes hierarchy, and hence to each other, will be examined in a later paper. For now we may note that the theory offers an explanation of the common and too often justifiable criticism hurled at the social sciences in recent times of not being useful enough. The theory holds that real world action demands implicit or explicit consideration and decision on each of the five levels. It therefore follows that findings based on one level alone, however illuminating, will not be sufficient as a guide to practical activity.

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