

PAMPHLET 6

SELF-ORGANIZATION

By Tom Heuerman, PH.D.
with Diane Olson, PH.D.

Self-organization is the spontaneous emergence of order from disorder. The concept of self-organization originated in the early years of cybernetics when scientists began to construct mathematical models representing the logic inherent in neural networks. Experiments demonstrated that **chaotic behavior always came to order and did so in a relatively short period of time.**

Self-organization in social systems is self-generated and self-guided; it is not driven by a heroic leader, bureaucracy, or external consultant. For example utility company executives wonder how to get front-line employees to behave every day the way they behave when a heat storm or a snow storm knocks out electricity for thousands of customers. In a crisis, the organization comes alive. Their purpose is clear: keep the lights on. Hostile and resistant employees become transformed into excited, enthused, and energized people. They take charge, initiative is shown, they work together, new ideas are born and used. People work long hours in extreme heat, cold, and wind. They take great physical risks to serve their customers and do so without serious accidents. They “keep the lights on” and feel proud. Their identity is built around their ability to respond to crisis. Their energy, creativity, and performance demonstrate what is lost to the organization during “normal” times.

Another example: A union tried to organize a customer service center of approximately 250 employees at a Midwestern newspaper. At the same time, management wanted to reduce the budget by millions of dollars. The employees redesigned the department without consultants. All participated in the redesign of jobs, departments, and supervision. Everyone had a role to play. The staff was reduced voluntarily by 35 percent; job descriptions were reduced by more than 50 percent. Employees learned new duties and took on new responsibilities. Each person reapplied for a job participating in a process they helped design. The union went away, millions of dollars were saved, customer service improved dramatically, and the organization felt alive, tired, proud, and enthused.

We see people respond to crises like these often. We’ve experienced this aliveness ourselves. In a crisis or when faced with a major challenge,

people often have the opportunity to “be the best they can be.” An overriding and powerful sense of purpose is clear to all. Supervision is forced to step aside and allow those close to the work to manage the work. The rule books go out the door and finding what works is what is important. Barriers are eliminated. Anyone can talk to anyone-- information is shared. Those with the needed skills or information lead regardless of rank, and all create utilizing available resources. People learn and adapt as they proceed.

When the crisis or challenge passes, organizations often return to wasted time, routine, little participation, disrespectful behavior, and excessive rules and supervision. Purpose is unclear. Boundaries become impermeable, and information is hoarded. People slip back to mediocrity, and the aliveness they felt dissipates. Mechanistic organizations continue to self-organize but the self-organization is driven underground by efforts to control. The self-organization will be incongruent (the results will not be what is wanted). People--workers, managers, and supervisors--will return to cynicism, frustration, demoralization, and disillusionment. Leaders will deny, blame, seek scapegoats, and retreat to their offices. These efforts to control or prevent self-organization go against the natural behavior of living systems and suppress vast potential and possibility. Why don't those with power allow self-organization to happen freely more often?

All living systems, including organizations and people, self-organize continually. The question is what is the identity the enterprise is organizing around? Hopefully, self-organization is around the shared identity created through the process of determining purpose, values, and vision. If the organization's purpose, values, and vision are not shared and internalized the organization will continue to self-organize but it will be at lower levels. Perhaps a department has worked to create their own purpose, values, and vision. That department will self-organize around those beliefs. Perhaps another department has not done this work. The people in that department will organize individually around personal beliefs. Absent shared purpose, values, and vision, the self-organization in the company will be fragmented at various levels, and there will be incongruence in the organization. Pettiness and self-serving behavior will be prevalent.

Self-organization is not abdication of leadership. It is worth repeating **the self the enterprise self-organizes around is the identity and beliefs created, shared, and internalized by the people in the organization.** Shared beliefs provide direction without control. Abdication is the failure of leaders to create, articulate, and weave the vision, values, and purpose into the very fiber of the organization and to hold people accountable for living them. Internalized beliefs, personal responsibility, and

accountability answer the leader's question, "How do I trust the people to do the right thing if I relinquish control?"