

Organizational Systems Theory: Using Organizational Analysis in Congregations

A look at:

- Mission
- The nature of organizations
- How organization affects mission accomplishment



Copyright © 2011 by CREDO Institute Inc., et. al. All rights reserved.

Organizational Systems Theory - 1

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Organization is necessary if people are to work together to reach a destination or fulfill a mission. To reach the Promised Land the people of Israel needed a leader, a structure for their community, ways to resolve conflicts, etc. – in short, to become organized. But structure and processes can hinder, as well as promote, achievement of a goal – as Jethro pointed out to Moses (Exodus 18:13-27). The single-leader model that was necessary to get the people out of bondage was not the best way to organize during the long wilderness trek. Organizations must respond to their environment, changing to meet altered circumstances, or they will die.

Congregations, too, have to be organized to accomplish their mission. They must be in touch with their environment, changing to meet the shifting needs of their community. In addition, they must be structured in ways that promote the mission. By focusing first on the purpose or mission of a congregation, organizational systems theory provides a way to assess whether structure and relationships promote or hinder mission fulfillment.

First let's look at organizational systems theory in general.

The Congregation as an Open System

- Dynamic relationship with environment
- Boundaries
- In-coming resources
- Internal process of transformation
- End “product” of mission and ministry



Organizational Systems Theory - 2

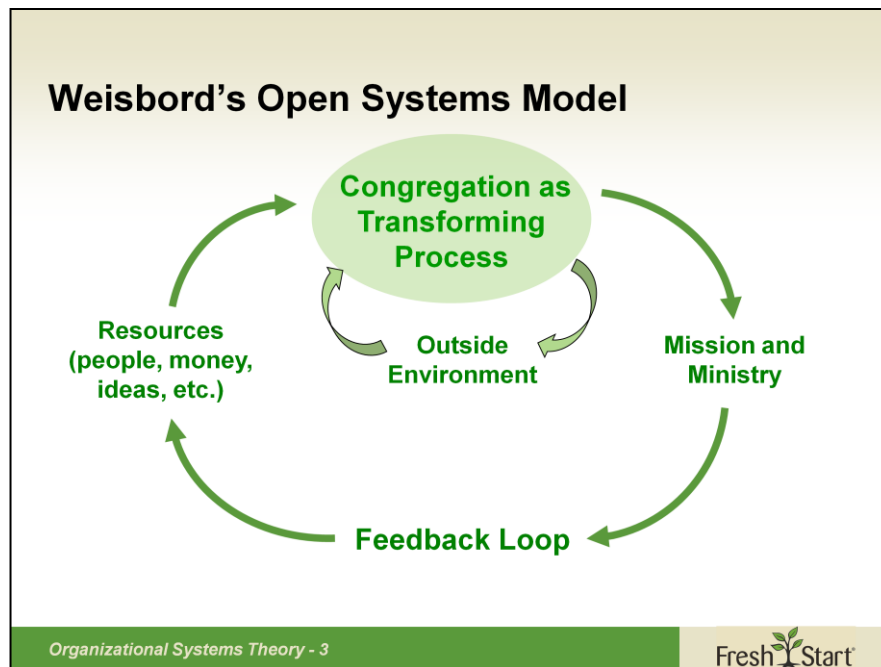
Fresh Start

Talking Points

Early organizational theories were based on industrial models and viewed organizations as essentially closed systems with rigid boundaries. The diagnostic techniques tended to be mechanical in nature (e.g., time/motion studies), with little focus on the relationships among people within the organization or between the organization and its environment. Social and biological systems, with their less clear boundaries and “outputs,” never fit this model. In fact neither did industrial organizations. The industrial model ignored the human element and the interdependence that organizations have with both the suppliers of raw goods and materials and the customers who benefit from an organization’s production.

Current theory emphasizes the open nature of organizations, the dynamic nature of their interactions with the environment and, indeed, the interconnection of all things. Congregations are just such open systems. They minister within a specific environment, responding to the needs of the immediate community around them (and hopefully to the needs of the broader world as well). Their mission may change over time as the nature of their neighborhoods or the needs of their community shift.

Even though “open,” any system still has boundaries – defined by congregations, for example, in statements of beliefs, membership requirements, the limits of their resources, and usually (though not always) physical space. Congregations take resources – time, talent, and treasure – and through their efforts transform these into mission and ministry.



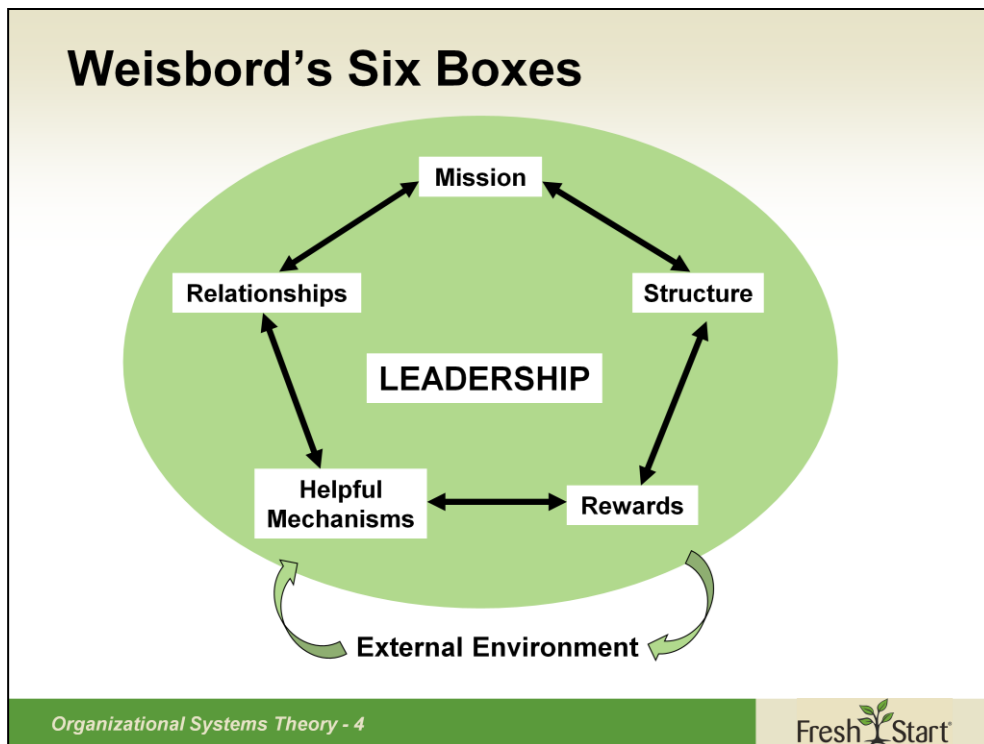
Talking Points

Organizational systems theorist Marvin Weisbord illustrates the open systems nature of organizations in this way (though he talks about “inputs” and “outputs”, terms changed in this illustration to “resources” and “mission and ministry” to make clear how the model relates to congregations).

Note the presence of a feedback loop. All life forms – plants, animals, people, organizations – flourish only to the extent that they can adapt to their environment, while still maintaining whatever makes them unique. Like thermostats that control the temperature of a room, life forms have certain feedback that is built-in and automatic. In the for-profit sector such things as market share or profits/losses are examples of automatic feedback. Such automatic feedback loops are less common in congregations and other non-profits. What ones can you think of?

Facilitate a brief brain-storming.

For most organizations (even for-profit ones), the automatic feedback loops are not enough to promote growth and vitality. We need to create space for the reflection, learning, and feedback necessary for us to flourish. Knowing whether programs and ministry meet the current and emerging needs of those to whom we minister and adjusting accordingly are necessary to keep a congregation from dwindling into obsolescence. Organizational analysis provides a way to assess the fitness of a congregation for meeting the ministry challenges inherent in its environment.



Talking Points

There are a number of models for organizational analysis, but Weisbord's is one that easily adapts to congregational systems. Inside the congregation, he sorts what he calls the "funny stuff" that goes on in organizations¹ into six boxes, which we will explore in more detail in a minute.

¹ Quote from Weisbord, Marvin R., *Organizational Diagnosis: A Workbook of Theory and Practice*, p.8.

Inside the Boxes



Formal System:

- By-laws
- Committee structure
- Policies/procedures, etc.

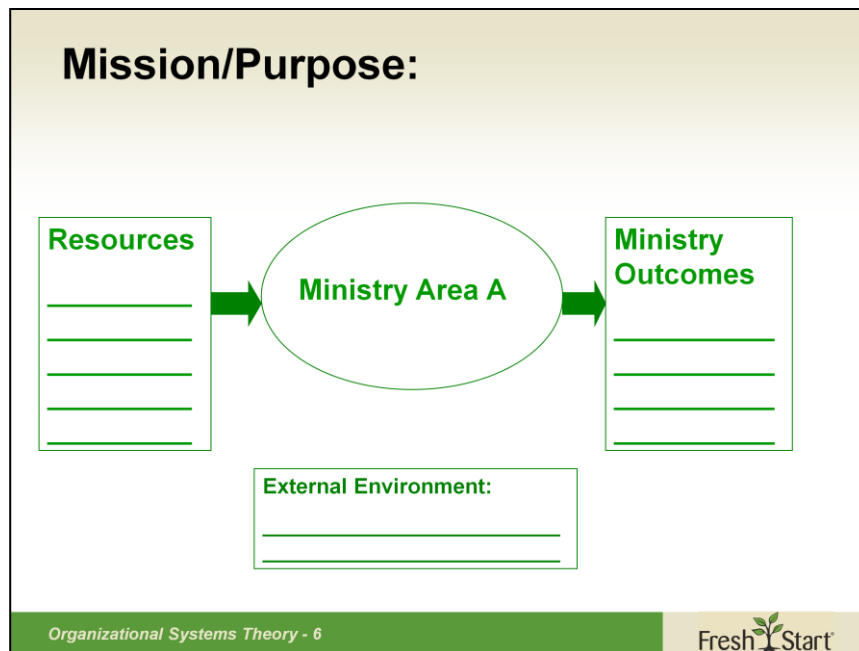


Informal System:

- Values and norms
- Relationships, etc.

Talking Points

Within each of the boxes there are both formal and informal systems: the former consist of our written organizational charts, by-laws, and procedures, while the latter are unstated and often reflect how work actually gets done. Both need to be taken into consideration.



Talking Points

Distribute Handout 1.

It is probably easiest to understand what the boxes mean if you take an example from your own congregation. I suggest that you not try to do the whole congregation, but rather focus on some aspect of it – for example, youth ministry, outreach to the homeless – any ministry for which you can define the boundaries, which involves a number of people to accomplish, and about which you have some concerns.

The first of Weisbord's boxes is purpose or mission; we begin our analysis from that perspective. So first, describe on this piece of paper the mission you want to use as your example. Put the name of the ministry (e.g., "youth ministry") in the oval at the center. At the top write the ministry's mission or purpose. For the moment, assume that its current mission or purpose is OK unless you already know that a change is needed. In that case put the new mission/purpose at the top and use the organizational analysis to see whether your congregation is positioned to meet this new mission.

On the left list all the resources that are a part of that ministry – the people who are directly involved/responsible, funds dedicated, any other resources you can think of, including organizations or individuals outside your congregation with whom you partner. On the right, describe what its services or ministries are. Leave the external environment blank for the moment.

Give participants several minutes to complete the Handout. If you are facilitating a joint clergy/lay session, have participants work in congregational teams to identify an area and complete the various analyses.

Mission: Why Are We Here?

- What is the mission?
- Are people clear about the mission?
- Are they largely in agreement with the mission?
- What is the level of commitment?

Talking Points

Here's a sheet that lists all the "boxes". ***Distribute Handout 2.***

We are starting with "mission" (or as Weisbord calls it, "purpose"). Without being clear what our mission is, it is difficult to assess whether we are appropriately organized. In addition, whether people are clear about, agree with, and are committed to a common sense of mission or purpose will factor into our success.

You have already identified your mission (or a subcomponent of it). Thinking about the mission you identified, spend a few minutes would you say that people within the congregation are clear about this mission? Are they in agreement? And what is their level of commitment to that mission? Jot down your answers to these questions.

After a few minutes, ask them to share with their congregational team (if they have one) or a partner, then move on to the next slide.

Are We on Target? Scanning the Environment



- Trends
- Stakeholders
- Expectations
- Demands

Organizational Systems Theory - 8

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Ministry is always contextual – we may be perfectly organized and structured to meet a past mission but not for the present, much less the future. So once we have defined the area that we want to assess, we need to check the mission against our environment. In organizational systems theory this is called an “environmental scan”. In developing a Parish Profile, congregations do just such a scan – looking not only at their history, but at the neighborhood within which they live, its needs, and the places where those needs intersect with God’s call.

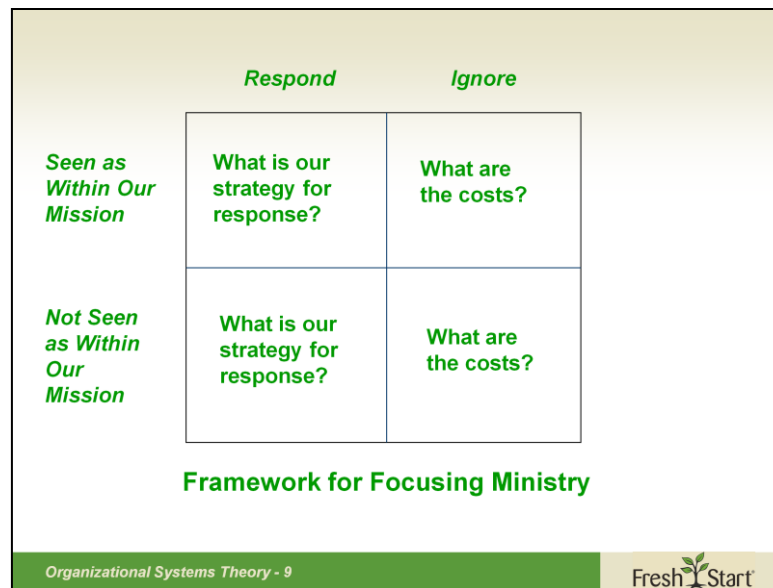
How might you get information about **trends** affecting your community and its needs?
Facilitate a general brainstorming, capturing ideas on a flip chart.

Now let’s think about “stakeholders”. Taking youth ministry as an example, who might they be – the people within and outside your congregation who impact your mission, care about what you do, and/or can partner with you?

Facilitate a general brainstorming, capturing ideas on a flip chart. Prompt the participants, if necessary, to think outside the box and beyond the obvious stakeholders such as the youth, their parents and the Christian Education teachers to include the high school principal, the juvenile justice judge, the police, anyone with a stake in the well-being and up-raising of the community’s youth.

Now spend a few minutes completing the bottom portion of the chart on Handout 1. What are the trends (e.g., demographics) affecting your ministry area? Who are the potential stakeholders in your community? What are the implications for your mission raised by the trends, stakeholder expectations or demands? Find a partner and briefly share what you have discovered so far.

Allow 15-20 minutes for participants to complete their Handout and share their discoveries with a partner. If you are facilitating a joint clergy/lay session, have participants discuss their responses in congregational teams.



Talking Points

Before moving to the rest of the “boxes,” let’s talk a moment about stakeholders. Because different stakeholders have potentially different points of view, it is important to involve as many of them as possible in your environmental scan. There are a number of ways to do so, and the bibliography I am handing out now lists some resources if you want to explore this topic further. **Distribute Handout 3.**

Engaging stakeholders in the conversation will generate a number of ideas, some falling within the scope of your ministry and others not. All must be reviewed in the light of your discernment of God’s call. A helpful framework for sorting out the ideas is this one. If the idea is seen as within your mission you can develop a strategy to incorporate it or can decide that, however good the idea, you cannot implement it (at least not at this time). If you decide not to respond, what are the costs – would some people become disaffected or would there be a major gap in services to a certain group? Can someone else take up the cause?

On the other hand, some ideas may be well outside the resources, expertise, and sense of call for your congregation. In this case, you could simply ignore the suggestion but there might be a cost to doing so. Another option is to develop a strategy for seeing that the need gets met – identifying other resources in the community, being willing to partner with another institution to raise the issue to the community as a whole, or taking on some piece of the issue which you feel is within your mission.

Staying with our example of youth ministry, perhaps the high school principal has raised the need to provide English language tutoring to a new group of immigrants, many of them with teenagers. You might feel that falls well within your congregation’s mission and start a new outreach program. Perhaps the police chief identifies the need for a shelter for teen runaways – something which your congregation is not in a position to provide. You could, however, join in an effort to raise awareness (and maybe funds) in the community to develop such a shelter.

As an aside, this model works for on-going ministry and programs as well. Is each still within your mission? If so, but resources are tight and you stopped doing it, what would be the costs? Are there other options? If the program no longer fits your mission because of changing needs, and you stopped doing it what would happen? Any questions about this model? Now let’s go back to your example and walk through the rest of the “boxes”.

Structure: How Are We Organized?

- How is the Vestry organized?
- What about formal committees?
- What are the written by-laws, policies and procedures?
- What about the informal ways in which mission gets accomplished?
- Are roles and responsibilities clear and discrete?
- Do formal/informal structures help or hinder mission fulfillment?

Organizational Systems Theory - 10

Fresh  Start

Talking Points

The second box looks at structure. If our mission is clear, then we can assess whether we are organized in ways to accomplish it. Both formal and informal structures are important to consider as sometimes they conflict with each other. Look at the resources you identified on Handout 1 – in what ways are interactions among them structured? Who's in charge? Are there written policies and procedures, etc.? Who gets things done and how? Not all the questions here may apply to your example since you are looking at only one mission area, but think about the ones that do and jot down your answers.

Give participants a few minutes to record their responses, then move on.

Relationships: How Do We Get Along?

- What are the congregation's stated behavioral values?
- What are the informal norms for behavior? Are these in line with the stated values?
- What is the extent of cooperation and collaboration?
- How are conflicts resolved? Are formal systems used or do they tend to be solved informally?

Organizational Systems Theory - 11

Fresh Start 

Talking Points

Sometimes structure can get in the way of relationships, particularly where roles and responsibilities are not clear. But there are other things to consider with regard to relationships. What are the stated values of the congregation, particularly when it comes to behavior? Are there tacit or stated covenants for being together? For example, the congregation may state they are welcoming to families with small children, yet have an informal expectation that small children will not be present during the main worship service. How cooperative and collaborative are members when it comes to mission accomplishment? What is the level of conflict and how are conflicts most often resolved?

Again, thinking about the ministry area you identified, answer these questions.

Give participants several minutes to complete their responses, then move on.

Rewards: Are Our Incentives and Sanctions in Line with Our Mission?

- How are people recognized for their contributions – formally and informally?
- What kind of contributions, behavior, achievements get recognized in some way?
- Are these in line with the congregation's stated values and mission?

Talking Points

There is an old adage that the behavior you see is that which gets rewarded. Sometimes we reward – usually inadvertently – exactly the behavior we say we do not want. For example, we may promote collaboration but develop our budget in ways that foster competition among the various program committees. What formal and informal reward systems exist in your congregation, particularly with regard to the ministry area you identified? Think about how these might impact on the accomplishment of that mission and jot down your responses.

Give people an opportunity to fill in their responses, then move on.

Leadership: Does Our Style Fit Our Mission?

- What is the balance between task-orientation and relationship-orientation on the part of congregational leaders – lay and ordained?
- What is the leadership style – participative, top-down, a combination?
- Is the style appropriate for the mission?
- Is the style in line with the congregation's stated values?

Organizational Systems Theory - 13

Fresh  Start

Talking Points

Fulfillment of mission requires attention to both task and process or relationships. Most of us have a tendency to prefer one or the other. Too much attention to task can cause leaders to ride roughshod over people in their desire to accomplish something. Too much attention to relationships can paralyze decision-making to the extent that no action is taken. A wise leader is able to balance attention to both task and relationships – and to surround him/herself with people who have strengths in areas where the leader tends to have a blind spot.

Leadership style is also important – is the predominant style participative or more top-down? Is that style in keeping with the congregation's ethos? Is it appropriate for what needs to be done? (Remember, when a fire breaks out, the effective leader is the one who can exert top-down control!).

What would you say about leadership – the balance between task and relationship, and its style – for your identified ministry area?

Give participants time to jot down their responses, then move on.

Helpful Mechanisms: Do We Have What We Need to Accomplish Our Mission?

- What formal mechanisms (e.g., technology, ways of communicating, oversight procedures) are helpful? What ones get in the way of mission accomplishment?
- What informal mechanisms (e.g., norms, practices, traditions) aid in mission accomplishment? What ones get in the way?

Organizational Systems Theory - 14

Fresh Start 

Talking Points

The final box is “everything else” – all those mechanisms, formal and informal, that help or hinder mission accomplishment. We look at these last because they are the things that should enable mission; they are not the mission itself. When thinking about these mechanisms consider administrative committees such as Buildings & Grounds, Finance, or Personnel as “enabling ministries” – do they enable mission or do they get in the way? Think also about technology, ways of communicating, oversight procedures, coordination (or lack thereof) – whatever you think important to capture. For your identified ministry area, what helpful mechanisms can you identify? Are there some not-so-helpful ones as well? Jot them down.

Give participants several minutes to complete their responses, then call the group back together.

Take what you have just thought through and share it with your partner or in your congregational teams. What have you discovered about your ministry area? Did it confirm or confound something you already knew? What further information do you need? What might you want to do differently? What questions do you have? Take about a half an hour to share each other’s analyses.

At the end of the half hour, call the participants back together and lead a general debriefing. What were some of their “aha’s”? What questions do they have? After you complete the discussion, move on the final few points.

The Impact of Congregational Culture

- Degree of formality
- Degree of participation
- Degree of openness
- Extent of expected agreement
- Expected styles



Organizational Systems Theory - 15

Fresh Start

Talking Points

There are a couple of other points to keep in mind when undertaking an organizational analysis. One is the impact of congregational culture on values, norms, behaviors, and expectations. Some cultures are much more formal in their orientation and that will be reflected in the greater use of formal channels for decision-making and stricter adherence to written policies and procedures, even when those get in the way. Others rely on informal mechanisms and are surprised when called to account because of a violation of a widely-ignored written policy or procedure. It is not important whether the culture is formal or informal; what is important is that formal and informal mechanisms be in agreement.

How open people are in expressing their opinions, especially when they disagree, and how much participation they expect to have (or even want) will vary and will impact leadership styles, as well as effect cooperation and collaboration. Some congregations live with great ambiguity and successfully balance conflicting opinions; others set expectations for higher degrees of conformity.

The Influence of People's Background



Differences in how people relate in community:

- May be influenced by ethnic or national culture, education, economic status
- Can be an issue when cultures collide

Organizational Systems Theory - 16

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Differences in how people relate in community may be driven by a congregation's history, by the preferences of individual members, and by ethnic or national culture, education or economic status. All of these things need to be taken into account in conducting any organizational analysis and designing any action steps to affect change.

What cultural differences or congregational norms may be affecting how well your ministry area is achieving its mission?

Facilitate a general sharing.

Using Organizational Systems Analysis

When to Use:

- For reflection – taking stock
- When there is change in environment
- If there is a “pinch”

Basic Steps:

- Define boundaries
- Look at resources
- Do an environmental scan
- Involve the whole system
- Check each of the “boxes”

Organizational Systems Theory - 17

Fresh  Start

Talking Points

When might you want to use organizational systems analysis? It can be used as a way of stepping back and simply “taking stock” of the congregation’s vitality. Its use may be triggered by a shift in the environment or a “pinch” that tells you something is not working as it should be. As you have discovered today, it can be used for a discrete program or ministry area or broadened to include the congregation’s entire ministry. What is important is to define the boundaries of your inquiry very clearly.

In addition to using the six boxes, you will want to take a look at the resources used for a given ministry – are they sufficient? Are they in line with priorities? Are they the right kind? And you need to scan your environment – even if you are doing something very well, if it is no longer needed then good stewardship would call for redirecting those resources to something more pressing.

Finally, because congregations are open systems you will get better information and better ideas for change if you involve the whole system – bring in everyone who is engaged in the ministry, who contributes resources, who partners with you in the outside community, who is a recipient of your ministry – and if you can’t bring everyone together, at least involve a representative sample.



Almighty God, whose loving hand has given us all that we possess: Grant us grace that we may honor you with our substance, and, remembering the account which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Book of Common Prayer, page 827

Talking Points

Basically this is about mission and stewardship – making sure that we are responding to God’s call and are wisely using the resources we have been given. Let us end with this prayer to be faithful stewards of God’s bounty.