

# Safeguards Letter

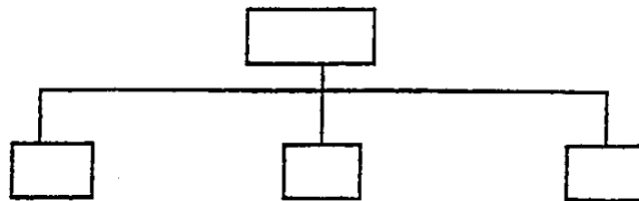
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## Image for an Organization

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For the past seven years, I've worked for a pretty big organization. Nearly every year, like many other organizations, the agency where I work publishes an official revision of its table-of-organization. Tables-of-organization are images or pictures of how a formal organization sees itself working. Long ago, it was WolfWolfsberger who first made clear to me the customary discrepancy between how an organization envisions itself and how things inside the organization actually work. The day-to-day world often adds lots of squiggly lines to the "org chart".

In a time when both the organization where I work and lots of other organizations that have tried to offer service to people with developmental disabilities are reconsidering their shapes and functions, in view of the needs or demands of the people some now urge us to think of as "customers", it occurred to me that it might be useful to give thought to the images that we use to portray how our organizations either do or are supposed to work. Below is the customary picture of a formal organization; it is certainly, in simplified form, the picture that we have relied on when we want an image to depict organizational shape. As far as I know, this particular shape, which can be symbolically cast in shorthand as a "pyramid" (the graphic shorthand that I usually use to stand for a formal organization) has its origin in the military, with its emphases on chain-of-command, lines of reporting, and at least theoretical accountability.



I think its worth asking ourselves whether this picture of an organization fits either the futures that we see for the people with whom we work or the new missions for support agencies that those futures may imply. I can think of several reasons why the pyramid doesn't fit.

- The usefulness of the image of the organizational pyramid is connected to the assumption that we have control over all of the forces with which we have to deal in order to work toward an organization's goals. Such forces include money in "sufficient" amounts, the uniform performance of workers, the unambiguous response of communities (e.g., employers, schools, social agencies, associations,

etc.) to our efforts. Clearly, we do not have such control. Our agencies are part of what organizational thinkers have called a "turbulent environment".

■ The organizational pyramid implies that command-and-obedience are the drivers of performance. As organizations grow larger, more complex, and as they work within larger territories ( e.g., not just buildings but entire communities), the illusion of command-and-obedience fades. Tolstoy pointed out that command-and-obedience often fails even in a military context; see the postscript to War and Peace for his thoughts on the matter. How much less will commanding work in small, spread-out organizations that have the ambition of supporting a variety of people with increasingly personalized responses?

■ The pyramid design has the unfortunate effect of pushing the responsibility for really hard choices upwards along the reporting lines. Regardless of whether the "king" of this kind of organization wants to rule, the logic of the design says that the way to get things done is to cause some kind of reaction or distress for the king. The king will then issue the right command so that problems can be resolved. No king ( even a smart and very experienced one) has that kind of wisdom.

■ The pyramid shape has no logical place within it for a person who uses services or supports. Such a person does not usually appear on the tables-of-organization for social service agencies. The implied place, in many human service organizations, for the person who uses services is at the bottom of the table, beneath the authority of the directly-helping staff members. Newly restated visions for the citizenship and dignity of people with developmental disabilities don't accord well with this image.

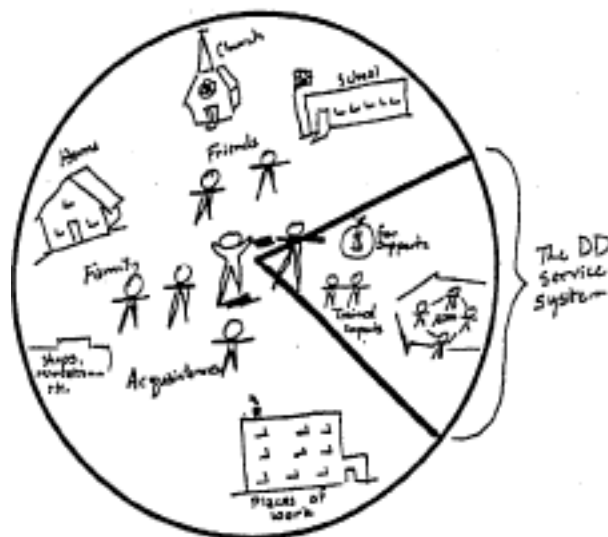
Isn't it time to find other images for our organizations?



For the sake of stimulating thought and maybe argument (not a bad thing), let me propose another image---another shorthand symbol that might, by virtue of its shape, more accurately represent the way that organizations seem to want to assist people who have disabilities. Suppose that we start with a person who has a developmental disability and that person's community. In concert with the missions of many agencies, suppose that we want the person to enjoy full citizenship and participation in the life of her/his community. Suppose that the circle at the left represents the community of which this person is or might become a member.

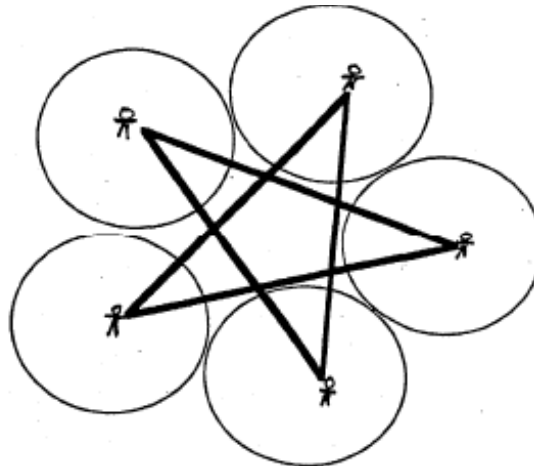
Supportive organizations exist because people with developmental disabilities have had difficulty in managing community life without help. The difference between support organizations now and earlier such organizations established to offer help is that now most supportive organizations say that they want to provide help to people right in the places where the people are--in their homes, within their families, in places of ordinary work, school, etc. So, our supportive organizations are part of the communities that we're trying to affect, and in those communities we try to carry forward relationships of support to certain people who can benefit from such relationships.

Any of our agencies might, then, be seen as a slice or wedge of the community that has a particular interest in a person primarily by virtue of that person's disability. At the tip of that wedge, next to the individual who uses the support that we offer, is another person ( or it could be a group) who is that individual's main contact with the work of the agency or system. Call that person standing alongside, oh, a "case manager" or "service coordinator". Or call that person an advocate, or maybe call the person mom or dad or brother Steve or Aunt Phyllis. Whomever we find in the alongside position is a key to organizing supports that the "focus person" may want or need. Maybe we could see the person standing alongside as the chief interpreter to the agency or system of the individual's wants or needs. Let's look at this in a diagram.



I think that the wedge or near-triangle on the right side of this diagram may be thought of as the developmental disabilities service system particularized for this specific person. Haven't we promised personally or individually designed supports for people with disabilities for a long time? From inside this wedge flow to the individual the funds that pay for necessary supports, the trained experts who bring their special knowledge and experience to bear, the administrators (accountants, human resource specialists, planners, etc.) who enable things to work. This circle with a wedge may be seen as a close-up, high resolution view of the developmental disabilities system. This is how the system might be portrayed as it applies to just one person.

Suppose that we retreat to the middle distance. How might this developing image of an organization look from a little farther away, when we have more than one individual with disabilities to consider? If we take the depiction of the particularized system above and cluster it with a few other similarly-organized depictions, we might end up with an image like this



Things start to get complicated when we begin multiplying the number of people to whom a worker or group of workers might have some responsibility. The image of a circle with a demarcated wedge has now, by means of this multiplication, turned into a star. If the function of administration is to enable useful action within each of the circles--that is, within an individual person's life in community--then how will that administration occur? The force that impels decisions can no longer be said to be the receipt and execution of instructions from above. Now the force has become the terms of the agreements reached by individuals and their circles that exist within community. This shift might make us ask •

- How do "direction" and "accountability" work in an organization that's a star and not a pyramid? How will people doing administrative or supervisory work know what to do? How will they know whether the things they do are the right things? If they are the right things, how will the doers know how well they are doing them?

■ How will the circles connected to the "points" of the star relate to one another? How will I as either a supportive or administrative worker know how to divide my time so that each person assisted by my work unit (this is what the star may represent, as an organizational image) gets a needed or fair response? Note that what's needed and what's fair are not necessarily the same.

■ How many points can a star have and still be a star? In other words, how many individuals can a work unit arrange its effort toward while staying coherent and functional? In the image above the star has 5 points. It may be unlikely that any work unit can redesign itself so that it attends to just 5 people. But, how big can a work group get before its identification with the individuals supported gets lost--before it loses touch with the circles and individuals who are its reason for being?

Finally, let me push this image just a bit further. If we were to retreat a greater distance to look at an organization that tries to support hundreds of people with the star, instead of the pyramid, as an organizing image, what we would see is a constellation. We'd see lots of stars, of varying intensities (at least from our point-of-view), arranged in patterns, to which we might give names. There are two things that I think are interesting about the image of a constellation. First, the names for them change, according to what people in different places and times have wanted the constellation to represent. In other words, the pattern is interpreted as being one that is useful to "us", for purposes that we have in mind. So should the organization that supports people with disabilities be shaped in congruence with our purposes. Second, I've looked at the night sky quite a bit, and I've never yet seen a constellation that is shaped like this

