

# **SOCIOMETRY AT WORK**

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# 1. ABSTRACT

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Sociometry is the science within psychodrama which enables us to explore and display the informal relationships between people. Moreno's applications enable the sociometrist to "attack the problem not from the outer structure of the group, the group surface, but from the inner structure."

The hypothesis guiding this presentation is that when the positive sociometric connections in a work group are depleted, the ability of group members to contribute to the work of the organisation diminishes and the work or the life of the group grinds to a halt. The 'new' work for the group then is the building of the relationships.

In the example presented from a consultancy project, sociometric concepts and methods are used to illustrate the thinking of the sociometrist which lies behind the assessment of an organisational problem, the construction of interventions and the implications for the subsequent development of the organisation.

Jacob Moreno  
(centre)  
interviewing

## 2. PREFACE

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*Sociometry is a science which enables us to explore and display the informal relationships between people*

I have increasingly noticed in my work as an organisational development consultant that it is the informal network of inter-relationships, the inner structure of the group, which facilitates or hinders the 'work' of an organisation. This has led me to alter the emphasis of my thinking about and approach to problems in organisations. The principles and practices of sociometry have greatly assisted me in establishing a framework for analysis and subsequent interventions.

I have been driven with a passion to discover how groups work. Sociometry is a science which enables us to explore and display the informal relationships between people. Jacob Moreno, the founding father of sociometry, defines it as "the inquiry into the evolution and organisation of groups and the position of individuals within them." He goes on to write "As the ...science of group organisation - it attacks the problem not from the outer structure of the group, the group surface, but from the inner structure."<sup>1</sup> Moreno's definition of this area of group life is congruent with what I have discovered through my own work with groups and organisations.

*the sociometrist enables the invisible, or imagined nature of the relationship to become visible*

My passion to understand how groups work has been based on a desire for mastery and understanding of relationships both in my own life and in the groups I work with. By using physical space and the concept of distance to represent the nature of the emotional relationship between people, the sociometrist enables the invisible, or imagined nature of the relationship to become visible. This display enables further exploration. I ask myself these questions: *How come there is this distance? How has this occurred? What is the emotional response to this distance? What do you want to do about it, if anything?*

As I worked in organisations I began to observe that while the outer group structure of an organisation is apparent, be it senior executive teams, teams of managers and staff, project teams and service delivery units, the inner structure of relationships at any particular time, of who is close to whom, who is distant from whom, and on what basis, generally remains invisible and unspoken.

Sociometric investigation and display helps group members be aware of the powerful factors and forces that affect them in their

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1. Moreno JL "Psychological organisation of groups in the community" *Yearbook of Mental Deficiency*, Boston 1933. p31

*Sociometric investigation and display helps group members be aware of the powerful factors and forces that affect them in their relationship*

relationships with one another. By concretising and verbalising what is happening in particular relationships, group members realise that they are not alone, but that they are part of a shared dynamic. With this information, the group members may be stimulated to create new patterns for themselves. Information, in the form of awareness of difference, which Moreno called companion/measure, changes the receiver.

As I worked in organisations using this method I began to see that this expression of simple truth brings relief through validation, for example, *"So that's what is going on here"* and affirmation, *"Yes, that's what is happening between us."* This in turn assists in resolving the tension. The expression of thinking and feeling, and the shared information about group members' relationships results in three things. First, it confirms that there is an inner structure to the group relationships. Secondly, this enables group's members to feel more united within themselves, and therefore they are more able to warm up to a breadth of roles within themselves. Thirdly, this process helps the group define itself and brings greater strength to group members' relationships, enabling them to be more productive.

I took every opportunity to practise these methods and find out more, in training groups, at experiential meetings, and at psychodrama gatherings. As a result, peers and colleagues participated in classical sociometric tests, decided criteria and shared their reasons for choosing and not choosing. I grappled with the complexities of the sociomatrix to reveal the sociograms and to reflect on what seemed to account for the underlying patterns of relationships.

My early response to this work mystified me. I would be amazed at the emotional response of others to sharing their reasons behind their sociometric choices. I was conscious that my own fears were of being rejected if I told these truths. I noticed too that sometimes this was true. I became aware that many of my relationships strengthened as I brought my inner feelings and responses forward.

As my confidence grew I worked with the classic sociometric test with groups of managers, choosing criteria around leadership and who they were willing to be coached by in their peer group. I learned to work with managers' fears and concerns of having their choices exposed, of their sharing why they had chosen another or not. I learned to reveal more of the nature of the informal relationships between people in groups and explored the implications of these for the functioning of the group and for my roles as group leader. I noticed that being more conscious of the

*Group members  
therefore had  
more information*

nature of the inter-relationships enabled me to bring forward my thinking about my interventions in groups. Group members therefore had more information and greater choice in deciding how to influence the groups they were leading and participating in.

As a result of these experiences, I have growing confidence in the concept that there is an inner and outer structure in groups as proposed by Moreno in his theories of sociometry. I have a definite sense that I can continue to make creative applications of these principles in my work in future.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge a number of people who have inspired me to follow my interest in sociometry and have been there to encourage me and assist me over the past eleven years:

- **Max Clayton** encouraged me to reflect on the sociometry of the protagonist in psychodrama workshops. It was here that sociometry first came alive for me. Before my eyes, the invisible was made visible and this created magic for me. Max inspired me to apply these methods in both my own life and my work in organisations.
- **Lynette Clayton**, my primary trainer, taught me to use a systems analysis based on a modification of Homan's<sup>2</sup> model of group behaviour. With this simple model I sharpened up my observations of the impact of this work and my ability to report back to organisations strengthened.
- **Warren Parry** encouraged me to experiment with these methods during his training workshops.
- **Ann Hale's** generous interest in my work and detailed descriptions in her sociometry handbook gave me confidence to explore and experiment.
- My heartfelt thanks too to **Chris Hosking** who supervised my writing this thesis.

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2. Boas and Armstrong (Eds) *Experiential Psychotherapies in Australia*, PIT Press, p88

### 3. INTRODUCTION

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for people to be spontaneous, and therefore be learning and alive, they need to be in emotional relationship with various others around them (companions) which support them and provide the range of roles necessary for life

As I worked as an organisation consultant, one aspect of sociometry captured my attention and provided the basis of this study. Through observation I noted depletion of the social atom and the consequent 'social death'<sup>3</sup> or isolation of some individuals in organisations. Moreno describes the social atom as involving an individual and the people, near or distant to whom he/she is emotionally related at the time. It is a concept which arises out of sociometric measurement and observation. If the social atom of an individual is depleted, the ability of the individual to function in a spontaneous way is depleted. Specifically I have come to realise that for people to be spontaneous, and therefore be learning and alive, they need to be in emotional relationship with various others around them (companions) which support them and provide the range of roles necessary for life. It is the strength of these relationships which enables role development.

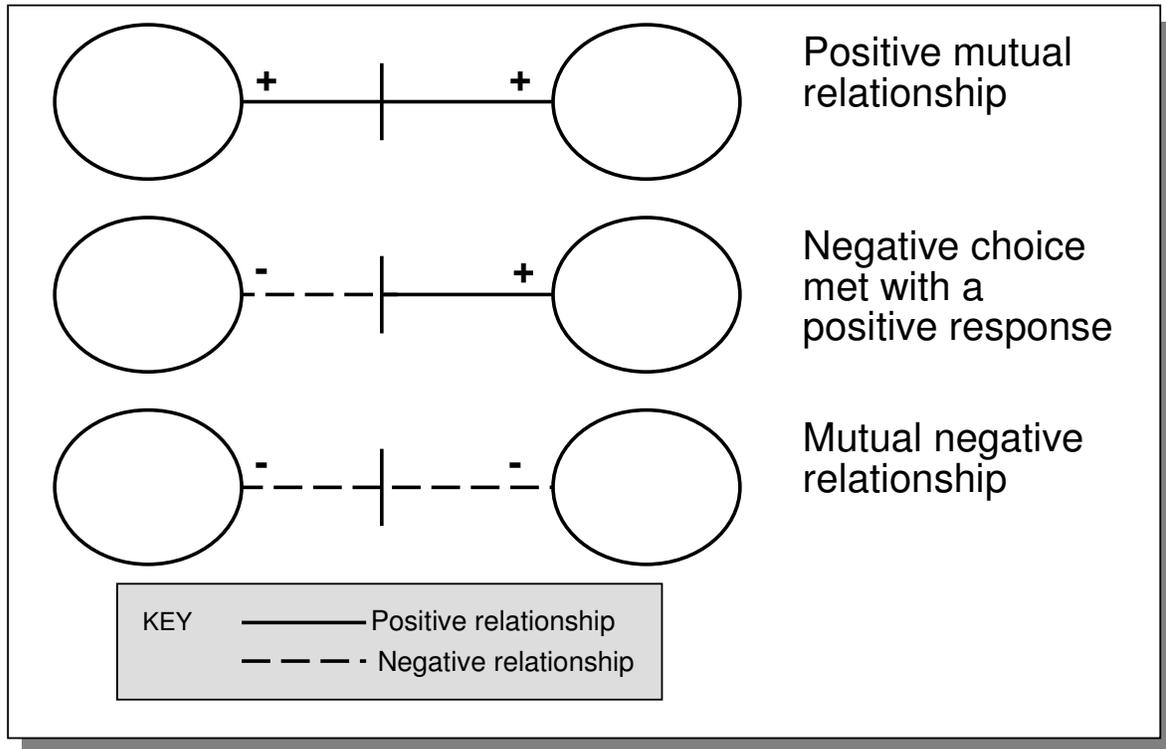
Moreno assures us that the term sociometry relates to its Latin etymology, *socius* meaning companion, and *metrum* meaning measure. He comments that both aspects have been neglected, in the deeper analysis of the meaning of sociometry. My own hypothesis arising from my studies with sociometry affirms the relationship between the two aspects of this definition.

Moreno describes the process which 'attracts' or 'repels' individuals to one another, that flow of feeling between people in relationship, as *tele*<sup>4</sup>. Tele is expressed in terms of being positive or negative. Tele can be described using different degrees of intensity, from neutral to weak to strong. The nature of the tele relationship may be expressed in terms of physical distance between two people either on paper, in real life or with miniature figures (Raimundo<sup>5</sup>). Display 3a (on the next page) is an example of tele relationships using a combination of Moreno's and Ann Hale's symbols.

Usually in organisations much attention is focused on the formal reporting structures. These structures are based on who relates to

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3. Moreno, J L. Sociometry, *Experimental Method and the Science of Society*, pp66-67
  4. *ibid* pp22-24 and p138
  5. Raimundo, Carlos. 1995. Presentation and Discussion, ANZPA Conference, Adelaide

### 3a Examples of tele between people



who for decisions in specific areas. This is known as management line authority. The people holding management positions and their functions are known. These structures are set up to handle everyday problems and are frequently behind comments referring to 'the hierarchy,' and might be described as the skeleton of the company.

In my work, I am increasingly invited into organisations to help people develop more satisfying and productive working relationships. I have found that I am aware of how my thinking as a sociometrist affects my approach to this work. My own observations and analysis of many of these situations is that it is the informal network of relationships - the 'tele' relationships, who agrees with whom, and who doesn't go along with whom - which influences and controls the actions of the group, and therefore their satisfaction and productivity.

Frequently I focus on the inner structure of relationships in the work group. In doing this I have noticed that it is important each group member has at least one positive relationship in the group. If this is not present, the work of the group tends to focus on interpersonal relationship difficulties, rather than business tasks.

My hypothesis is that when an individual's social atom is depleted in a work group, the ability of that individual to contribute to the work of the organisation diminishes and the work or the life of the group grinds to a halt. The 'new' work for the group then is the building of the relationships. If this 'new' work is not attended to promptly, there is a disintegration of the group caused by the increasing isolation of one or more group members. The group has a strong focus on the interpersonal relationship difficulties. Work centres around 'personalities' who appear to have extraordinary control over others, and who do not have managerial line relationships.

I have noticed that when the group has deteriorated to this point two things happen. One is that a schism appears between managers and staff, and industrial action is frequent and dominating. The other consequence is that group members find various ways to leave the group, e.g. through illness or new employment. I see my main task as a sociometrist working in organisations is to bring about a greater number of positive relationships between people, enabling the relationships to be strengthened, and to help the group set new formats that will enable these new bonds to be maintained.

This thesis describes one example of my work where I have applied sociometry in organisations. In the following paper I outline four areas of focus: a framework of thinking for assessing an organisational problem; the construction of a series of interventions to explore the problem; a display of the findings using sociometric methods; and a discussion of the implications of the results to the next intervention and subsequent development of the organisation. The project described took a total of three days over a two week period.

## 4. SOCIOMETRY AT WORK

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Our task as consultants working in organisations is to assist our clients continue being efficient and productive. What is the basis of our thinking and our methods as we approach an organisation encountering a difficulty? Where do we begin? In my work, I tend to focus on discovering what is happening within the internal structure of a work group when an organisational problem emerges.

This literature review covers two related areas: the uniting factors within internal group structures; and the options, concepts, and methods for sociometrists assessing and exploring these.

### 4.1 Review of literature

At the basis of sociometry is the notion of *tele*, that flow of feeling which attracts individuals to each other or which repels them. Tele is a two way process and therefore forms the basis for an assessment of relationships between people. Moreno<sup>6</sup> makes distinctions between tele, and empathy and transference, the latter two more depicting flow of feeling which is one-way.

The external structure of the group, that is, the formal organisation structure usually reflects the decision and responsibility structure of the group. However Moreno draws our attention to the inner structures of groups. Why would an inner structure occur? Why is it that the outer structure does not fulfil the needs of group members? Moreno's work proposes that for a group to function effectively, it is insufficient to only attend to the formal structure of a group and that without attention and intervention to the sociometric dynamics, ie the tele relationships between people, the group will eventually lose all its creative life.

*There are likely to  
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internal group  
structures*

Moreno's work showed that the basis on which any two people get together sociometrically is determined by criteria, "the common motive which draws individuals together spontaneously, for a certain end."<sup>7</sup> There are likely to be a myriad of ever-changing internal group structures, with people being drawn together on differing criteria. These subgroupings "give to the overt and tangible human society a deeply unconscious and complicated 'infra' structure."<sup>8</sup>

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6. Moreno, JL. *Who Shall Survive? Foundations of Sociometry. Group Psychotherapy and Sociodrama*, Student Edition, Royal Publishing Company, 1953, p 142

7. *ibid* p69

8. *ibid* p69

Moreno points out that the sociometrist's interest lies with groups which are built around strong criteria. The sociometrist is able to work with criteria in the form of questions, e.g. *Who in this group do you want to sit beside you at work? Who in the group do you go to for advice on a work problem? Who in the group do you see providing satisfying leadership in the pending project?*

Bion<sup>9</sup> observed two distinct groupings within the structure of therapy groups: a work group where group members acted as if they were in tune with the group's goal, and the basic assumption group where group members acted as if they were in the group for some other purpose. He identified three assumptions as uniting factors for group members in relationship to the group leader. He termed these the dependency assumption, the fight-flight assumption, and the pairing assumption. He noticed subgroupings forming around these.

Schein<sup>10</sup> noticed that groups formed for purposes other than the immediate task at hand. He identified that it is precisely because an individual brings multiple other group identities into any group - family, occupation, neighbourhood, friendship groups, prior employers, cultural experiences and so on - that he or she experiences new situations with anxiety. The anxiety is present before new configurations, new identities, and new associations are built. He observed three main interpersonal needs operating as dynamic forces for association:

Inclusion, Identity	– <i>Who can I be in this group?</i>
Control, Influence & Power	– <i>How much will I be able to influence what happens here?</i>
Acceptance and Intimacy	– <i>Will I be liked and accepted?</i>

He reported group members' responses produce further anxiety and preoccupation when meeting these needs in the group is thwarted, and positive energy when these needs are being fulfilled.

My study focuses particularly on using sociometric methods to explore and assess what is going on in the internal structure of an organisational group when there are problems or difficulties. It is specifically based on Moreno's<sup>11</sup> concept that there is both an

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9. Bion, WR. 1959. *Experiences in Groups*. Tavistock

10. Schein, Edgar H. *Organisational Culture and Leadership, A Dynamic View*. Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986, p150

11. Moreno, J.L. *Sociometry, Experimental Method and the Science of Society*, Beacon House, 1951, p31

external and internal structure in groups. Moreno makes distinctions between diagnostic criteria which tend to be associated with reporting past actions, and action criteria which take place in the present and in the presence of the group among whom choices are being made. Essentially action criteria questions are of exploratory value if they are significant to the members of the group at the time of the test.

Moreno outlined four requirements of sociometric explorations:

- a) that the participants in the situation are drawn to one another by one or more criteria
- b) that a criterion is selected to which the participants respond, at the moment of the test, with a high degree of spontaneity
- c) that the subjects are adequately motivated so that their responses may be sincere
- d) that the criterion selected for testing is strong, enduring and definite, and not weak, transitory and indefinite<sup>12</sup>

The application of sociometric methods as a practical method for understanding and organising groups in a wide range of settings has been recognised. (Carlson-Sabelli et al<sup>13</sup>).

There are a number of options for the consultant working with organisation problems. Breen<sup>14</sup> discusses structures and processes of organisations and describes the roles consultants may take on:

- The product consultant - we provide you with this
- The doctor-patient consultant - we think you need to do this
- The process consultant - working alongside the client to discover where are we now, where do we want to be, and how are we going to get there?

Sociometry provides the process consultant with significant concepts and methods for organisation assessment and development. The role of the sociometrist is to do with the discovery of 'where we are now.' Williams<sup>15</sup> describes the role of the sociometrist as "not recommending anything but (is) simply

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12. Moreno, J.L. *Who Shall Survive? Foundations of Sociometry, Group Psychotherapy and Sociodrama, Student Edition, Royal Publishing Company, 1953, p71*

13. Carlson-Sabelli, Linnea, Sabelli, Hector and Hale, Ann E. *Sociometry and Sociodynamics, p 147*

14. Breen, Michael, "Sociometry and Organisations" *Thesis presented for Assessment as Sociometrist, 1990, p 19*

15. Williams, Antony...*Clinical Sociometry to Define Space in Family Systems" Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama and Sociometry, Fall 1994, p 128*

providing ways for people to describe their relationships."

One sociometric method used to describe relationships in organisations is the sociogram. Breen<sup>16</sup> affirms "the power of making a map of what is happening within the group - of making the invisible visible, so that groups and individuals can choose whether to make the changes necessary to function as a successful working group." He gives examples of his work and reflects on some of the conditions for successful and unsuccessful sociometric applications in organisations in *Applied Sociometry*. Williams<sup>17</sup> comments "Appropriate sociometric interventions can extend systems' definitions of themselves and allow room for change."

*much of the real  
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structure*

Allied to the literature on the external and internal group structure is an emerging body of literature applying sociometric methods in business and organisations. David Krackhardt and Jeffrey Hanson<sup>18</sup> in the Harvard Business Review write about the company behind the chart, and affirm the notion that 'much of the real work of the company happens despite the formal organisation structure... these networks can cut through formal reporting procedures to jump start stalled initiatives and meet extraordinary deadlines. But informal networks can just as easily sabotage companies best laid plans by blocking communication and fomenting opposition to change, unless managers know how to identify and direct them'. They identified some criteria on which to assess the informal network of relationships - "Who do you go to for advice on your work" and "Who do you trust to keep in confidence your concerns about a work related issue?" They then compared advice networks to trust networks and drew implications for designing work teams, and making managerial appointments.

The literature reviewed describes Moreno's notion of the relationship between the internal and external structure of a group. There is increasing applied use of sociometric methods in assessing 'what is happening' in the internal structure of groups in organisations.

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16. Breen, Michael D. "Applied Sociometry" *Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama and Sociometry*, Volume 47, No 2, Summer, 1994, p57
  17. Williams, Antony. "Clinical Sociometry to Define Space in Family Systems" *Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama and Sociometry*, Volume 47, No 3, Fall 1994, pl26
  18. Krackhardt, David and Jeffrey Hanson. "Informal Networks: The Company behind the Chart" *Harvard Business Review*, July August 1993, p 104

## **5. THE PROCESS OF A CONSULTATION**

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### **5.1 Background noise**

Alarm bells were ringing. Our initial meeting had gone over time. Already I am thinking that I might be working with a group where role boundaries overlap and working agreements are ignored. My next consulting project is beginning to unfold.

### **5.2 The company**

The company has a national identity, is ten years old, and eight people are employed. The majority of staff have been with the company for an average of two and a half years with the range from three months to five years. Their business is in providing publication services to large corporations.

There are two main service groups in the company: one focuses on external relationships and obtaining business with clients (the marketing group), the other produces the materials clients want (the production group). Increasingly, the second group are developing client relationships focused on specific production details, and are meeting production deadlines. There is also a receptionist who answers all incoming phone calls, links callers to the appropriate person, word processes documents, co-ordinates outgoing mail and runs errands for managers and staff.

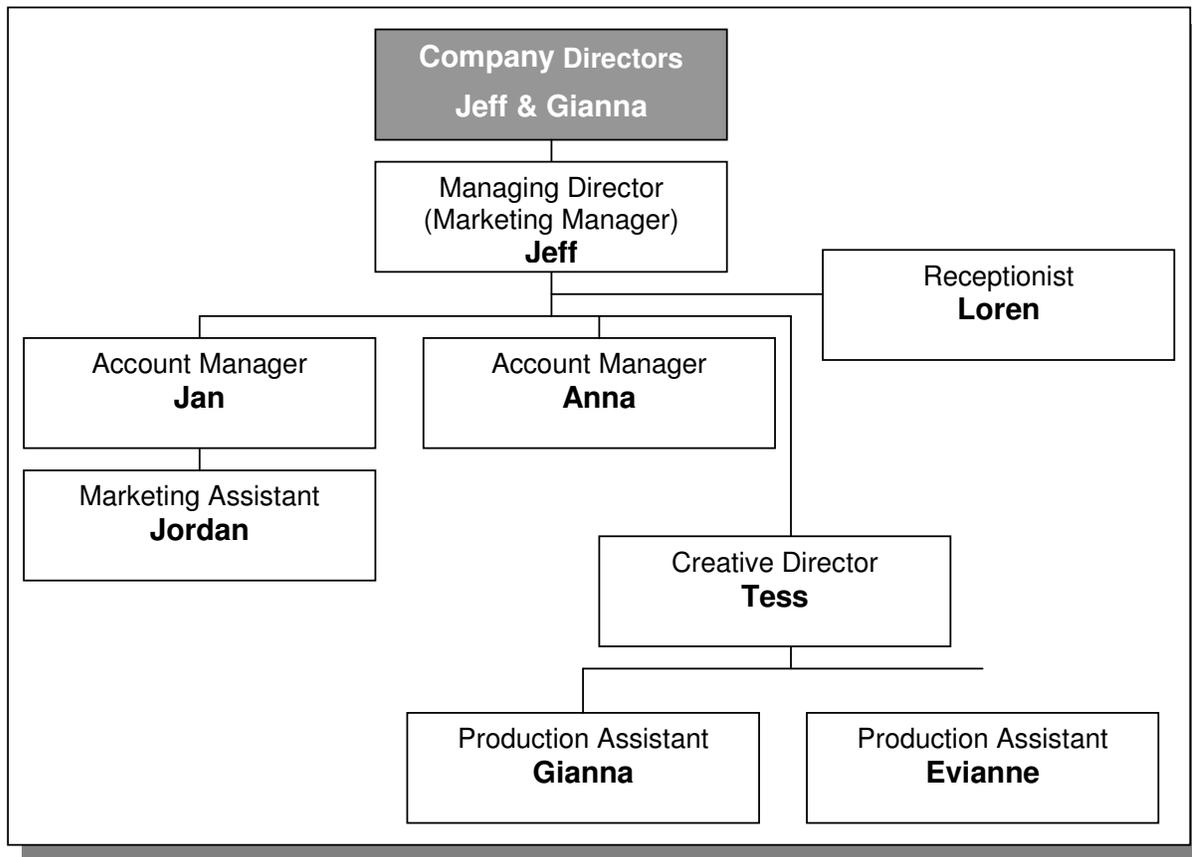
There is a formal organisation structure, (refer Display 5.2a). The work context requires tight deadlines for work being produced, a high level of co-operation among staff and use of technology. Staff work extended hours to meet deadlines. All these facets are expected by the managers as part of the job.

The office area has been recently upgraded and is elegant, with leading contemporary design and colours. The shared work space is open plan, meeting rooms have glass walls and it is easy to see what is going on. The exception is the Managing Director's office which is enclosed with a wooden door.

### **5.3 The presenting problems**

I meet with the Managing Director (Jeff) who is also a Director of the company. From time to time we are joined by the second Company Director (Gianna), who is also one of the Production Assistants. These two Directors report their dissatisfactions with staff repeatedly missing deadlines and the staff's apparent resentment at working long hours.

## 5.2a The Company Structure



The Managing Director reports that staff are reluctant to contribute in the irregular group meetings, leaving him increasingly uncomfortable about these meetings and not being able to put his finger on the problem. He reports staff have become increasingly focused on interpersonal relationships and spend considerable time on personal phone calls. They talk in small groups and cliques and in his perception are not focused on the work of the company. He also notices that staff are taking time off from the job for illness and "no real reasons".

During this meeting, I become aware of considerable defensiveness on the part of the Directors. They report that *"This is a small family business," "We can't keep pouring money in," "We do have an exceptional environment for people to work in,"* and of one staff member *"She hasn't kept up with technology."*

My assessment, at this point, is that while this is a relatively small group of people, subgroups of Director(s) and staff have formed and withdrawn from each other, and the relationships between the two are negative. As a way of coping with this negativity, the staff have apparently withdrawn from the Directors, and the Directors are puzzled and defensive. I also become aware in this briefing meeting that we are in a glass-walled room with the door closed. Voices are low. From time to time the Co-Director looks around as if to check

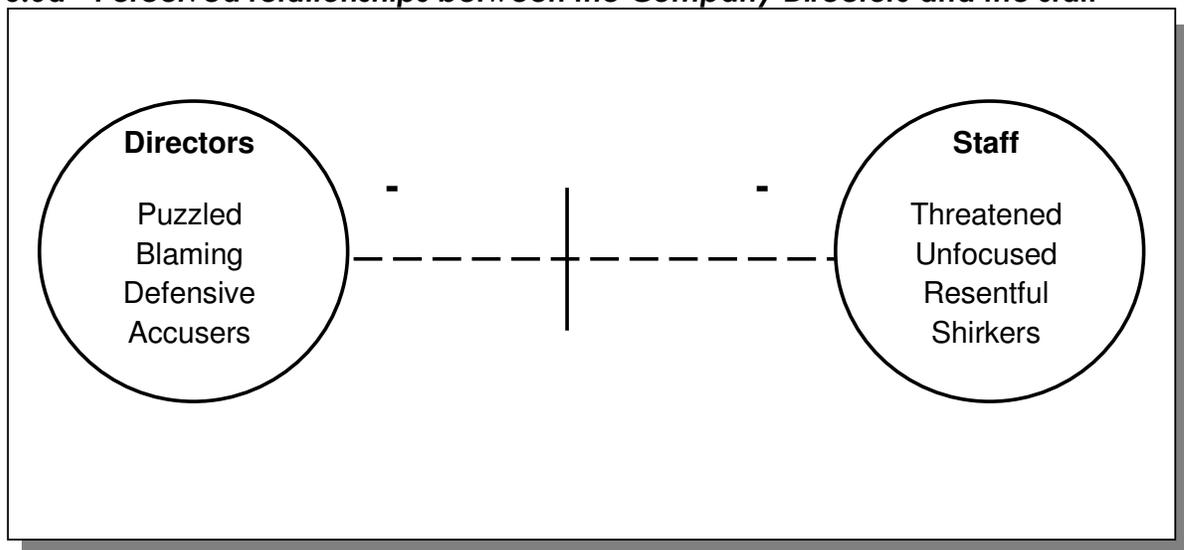
whether someone is watching. The atmosphere is one of anxiety and secrecy. I comment on this. Gianna responds by saying "The walls are thin and not soundproof."

From the stories of the two Directors, the problems outlined appear to be discussed in the informal network among staff. They report staff getting together in twos and three during work time and at breaks and disbanding when one of the Directors become visible. There are intense discussions in the bathroom and silence when Gianna walks in. It seems to me at this point that our discussion is tending to replicate a similar pattern of getting together then disbanding if someone is likely to overhear us.

Again my alarm bells are ringing. What is going on here? What has happened to have Directors criticise staff and staff apparently withdraw from their working relationships with their Managing Director? I feel convinced that something has happened to create this apparent mistrust.

I put my perceptions on paper. (Refer Display 5.3a)

### 5.3a Perceived relationships between the Company Directors and the staff



In my experience it isn't workable to have negative relationships between managers and staff: managers rely on staff to do the work of the company and staff rely on managers for direction and decisions. When I share this perception with the Directors, we agree.

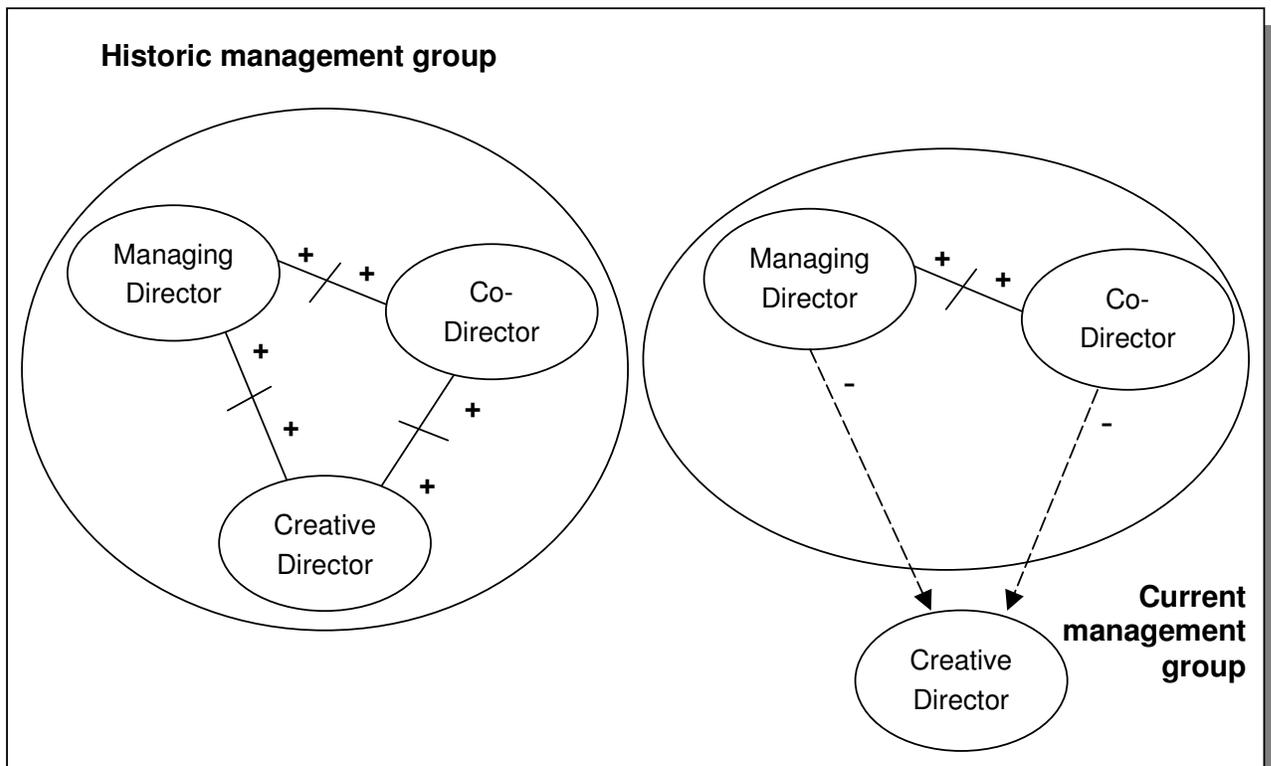
The Managing Director continues. He had recently discussed these concerns with a member of staff, Jan. Jan had been unwilling to discuss details with him and she reported that the staff had asked for 'someone' to come in to assist in sorting out these issues. Jan had discussed her concerns with another consultant working with the company, Bill. He had recommended me to staff and to the Manag-

ing Director. Bill himself reports positive relationships with both the Managing Director and the staff, and works with the company at times when they need project management expertise. Bill and I are colleagues and from time to time we discuss aspects of our work. Hence the Managing Director's invitation to me. As a consultant I am alert to some positive problem solving roles in the company. There is an agreement by both managers and staff that there is a problem, and an apparent willingness to discuss the problems and possible solutions with an external person.

The story from the Managing Director continues. Until recently, the Creative Director along with the two Company Directors, had managed the overall company. They had met frequently and discussed the development of the business alongside the day to day detail of current projects. In the previous six months, however, these three had not met for any company discussions. Why was this? Again I was thinking that there was a breakdown of the relationships, this time among the managerial group. The consequences of this means the Directors have ceased communicating with the Creative Director on company matters. (Refer Display 5.3b).

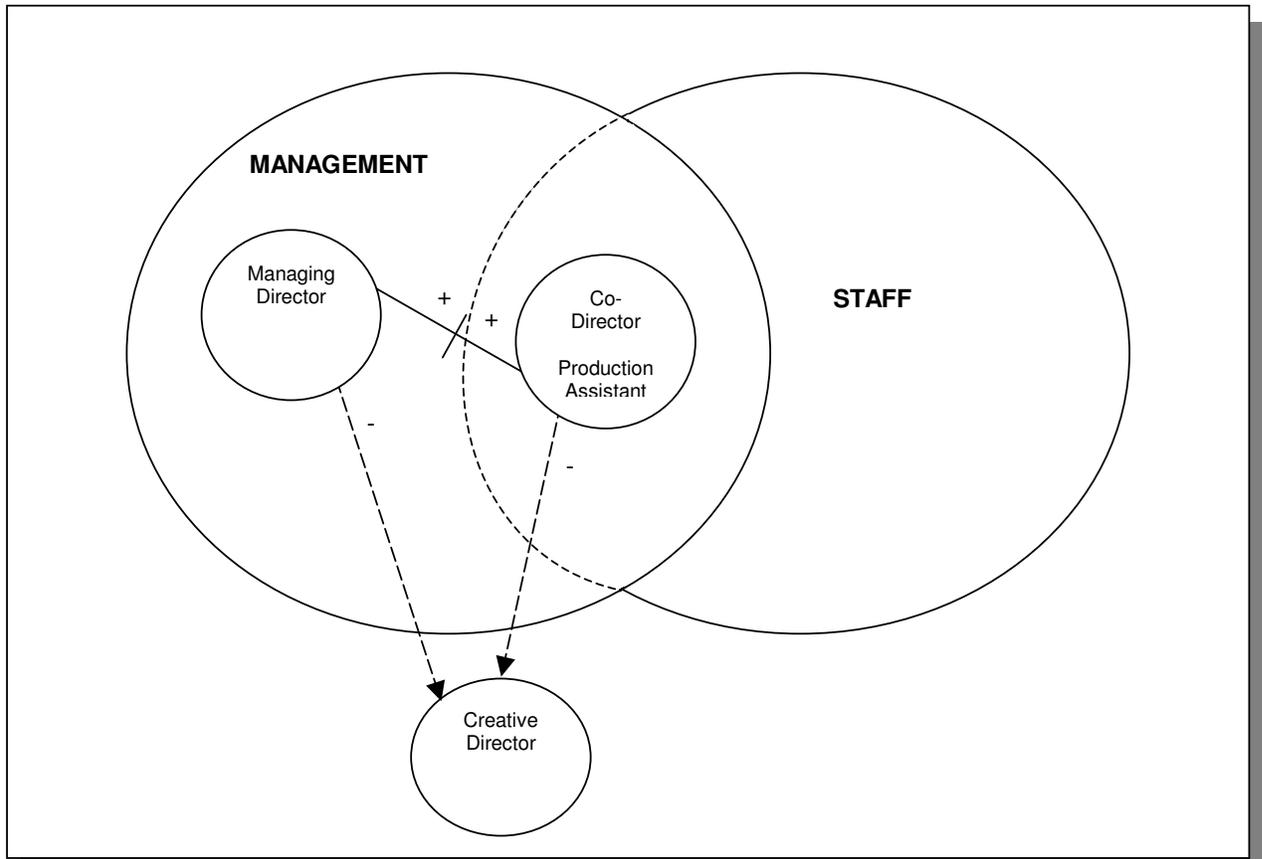
As a sociometrist, I am thinking that the likely impact of the two Company Directors discussing company concerns effectively isolates the Creative Director from the established managing and problems solving roles essential to the functioning of the company.

### 5.3b Historical and current company management groups



In this company, the situation is compounded in that Co-Director is also one of the staff; a production assistant reporting to the Creative Director. As a sociometrist and a consultant, my thinking is that it is likely that the reported mutual negative relationship between the Co-Director and the Creative Director is being taken into their day to day roles, and that this relationship is likely to be influencing other staff relationships. I am alert to discovering what this influence might be (See Display 5.3c), and how this relates to what is being reported.

### 5.3c Perceptions of the subgroups

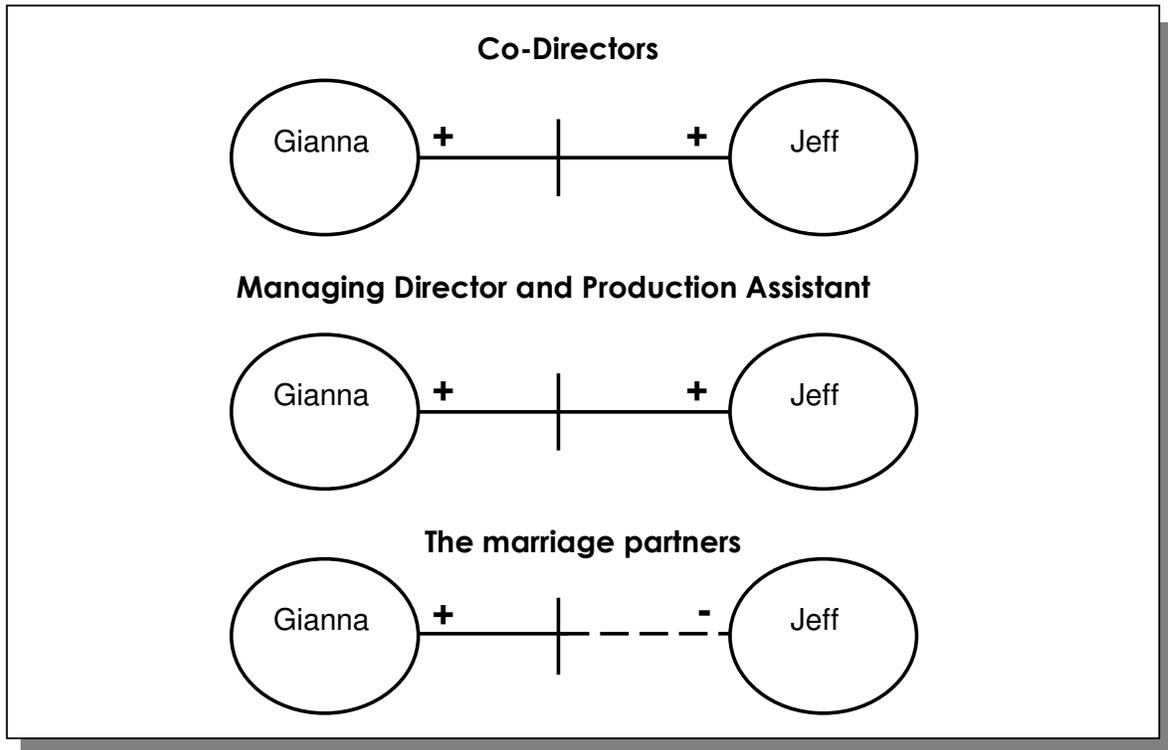


At this point in this initial meeting, the two Directors outline a plan to end the employment of the Creative Director. Their view is that she had fallen behind in her ability to contribute professionally. One of their justifications is that computers are increasingly part of the design business and she has not yet upskilled in that area. The Directors then share with me a proposal for restructuring the company.

Essentially they want to redefine the formal organisation relationships. Their proposal is to have Gianna take over the role of Creative Director when the incumbent leaves. Gianna is highly skilled in the computer area, and has developed her ability in many areas of the company in the past two years.

My interest and attention to the nature of both the formal and informal organisation relationships has been captured. In our first meeting, I discover that the two Company Directors are married to each other, and both have functions in the company - Jeff is the Managing Director, and Gianna a member of the production team. (Refer Display 5.3d).

### 5.3d Perceptions of relationships between the two Company Directors



From the interviews with the two Directors, my perception is that there is positive tele between the two Directors, and between the two in their functions as Production Assistant and Managing Director and negative tele from Jeff to Gianna's positive tele in the marriage partnership. In among this range of roles and sociometric relationships between these two people, I have two concerns.

One is that it appears the formal (the two Directors) and informal relationships, (Managing Director and staff member) are conflicted. It is unclear to me whether these plans of restructuring are emerging from the two Directors, from the marriage partners, or from a manager and one of his staff. My assessment is that this lack of clarity is likely to be confusing to staff too. Again, as a sociometrist, given the plan the two Directors have come up with, and the atmosphere of the briefing meeting, I am thinking that there is collusion in rejecting the Creative Director from the management

the formal...  
and informal  
relationships...  
are conflicted

group, and perhaps the organisation. (Refer again Display 5.3c). I am intrigued by this and want to explore both the impact of what is happening in this organisation and how relationships in the group might be rebuilt.

My second concern is as a consultant. My thinking conflicts with the Directors'. My opinion is that their proposed restructure alongside the presenting problems is premature, and not likely to work. It is more likely to create further difficulties as it has not been developed by those in the current formal structure. While this might not be a problem in itself, the absence of a forum to raise, discuss and resolve concerns is. My thinking is that others in the company are likely to be confused too, as to who to relate to on what issue, and who to go to for decisions.

## 5.4 The brief

My task was to discover what the staff dissatisfactions were and to create a process to resolve these dissatisfactions. I was also to discover whether the proposed 'restructure' would work; how this might be done, and the possible consequences of it.

## 5.5 The assessments

My assessment is that there is a conflicted relationship between what the Company Directors outlined as 'problems' and the 'solution' they are presenting. My opinion is that this is likely to be a mirror of what is going on in the company in terms of unclear and negative relationships.

My assessment focuses on four areas:

- The formal structure in the organisation for problem solving and decision making has broken down
- The working relationships between managers and staff have broken down and the Managing Director is not getting the information he needs to manage the productivity of the business
- Previous shared agreements and expectations about productivity have disappeared
- A new structure needs to be provided for staff to feel safe in revealing their concerns to managers

At this stage, I have heard from the Directors but not from staff. My thinking is that it is important to create a forum for staff to put forward their concerns. With this in mind, the interventions I design

begin to address each area of assessment and each is designed to strengthen the relationships among staff and between managers and staff.

## 5.6 The interventions

### *Intervention 1*

I decide to approach this group by interviewing everyone in the company to find out the issues as they see them. My plan here is to create the conditions to enable me to develop a positive working relationship with each group member.

As there have been no staff forums for discussing issues for over six months, I sense that people will want to talk and will have greater confidence in raising their concerns with me individually than in a larger group. This intervention has two purposes. The first is as I have outlined and the second is to enable me to discover the internal group structure and the formal network of relationships in the group.

Two of the seven interview questions formed the basis of the exploration of the informal network of relationships.

- *Who do you discuss your work concerns with?*
- *Who are you least likely to discuss your concerns with?*

The first question emerged in response to my concerns about an apparent lack of a formal problem solving forum and the sense that the organisation has stopped functioning well and has begun to withdraw from its tasks. The second question emerged from my sense that while this was a small and relatively informal group of people, the Managing Director did not have the flow of information he required to enable him to fully enact his function as Managing Director.

### *Intervention 2*

I decide to establish clear groundrules and agreements for the interventions so everyone knows what is going on. I outline the groundrules for the interviews: that the content of the interviews is confidential and I will take notes for my information only. The person I am interviewing can have a copy if they wish. I undertake not to show these notes or comment on the individual interview findings to anyone, and I will only refer to group issues if more than half of the group mention these in the interview. My thinking is that

in the short term while confidence is being rebuilt, staff need reassurance that their concerns are shared by others, ie they are group concerns. They also need reassurance that their individual concerns are not revealed and therefore managers will be less likely to retaliate on a personal basis.

Another working agreement was for me to present my findings first to the Managing Director, then the group the following day. I outline my thinking to staff to demonstrate and reaffirm the formal organisation structure, that in reporting to the Managing Director, he will be able to consider the implications of the findings and be able to respond to the group in a thoughtful way.

In presenting to all the other staff at the same time, I am treating them equally, and not signalling individuals out for 'special' treatment so no one person is 'favoured' over anyone else. In this way staff have reassurance that their concerns are shared by others in the group. This provides an opportunity to strengthen their relationships around particular issues.

### ***Intervention 3***

My proposal was then to have a workshop to identify expectations and work through the identified issues together so any subsequent decisions or actions taken would make sense to those involved. My intention was to design this so relationships would be strengthened.

### ***Intervention 4***

The Managing Director agrees to these interventions and agrees to delay his plans for staff reorganisation. This is a critical moment in the project. The delay provides opportunity for something new to emerge in the behaviour of the Directors and a beginning of more substantial and truthful work relationships between the managers. The Managing Director agrees to consider my suggestion that he work from his role as staff developer, so that he can express his concerns and expectations directly, and offer the Creative Director assistance in training and upskilling in new technology, before they both assess whether she can meet the new requirements of the role.

My intervention here is centred on re-establishing a working relationship between the Managing Director and the Creative Director based on the formal structure of the organisation and particularly enacting managerial roles through performance feedback. The Managing Director would bring his concern about the Creative Director's performance into their relationship in order

to discuss and propose strategies with her. This would enable the Creative Director to respond to the Managing Director in the context of their joint managerial functions.

At this point in the project, I begin Intervention

## 5.7 Results: Intervention I

In this section, I present the sociogram<sup>\*</sup> and discuss the inter-relationships and the implications for the organisation's work. In doing this, I am presenting something of the inner structure of the group, a measure of relationships on certain criteria. I explore Moreno's notion of 'companion' in this organisational setting.

From Display 5.7a we see that two group members are isolated, Gianna and Jordan. Their choice is not reciprocated nor are they chosen by any other group members. Gianna makes one choice, her co-director, Jeff who does not reciprocate. Jordan, who has been in the company for three months chooses her manager, Jan, who does not reciprocate. Jeff makes one choice which is not reciprocated, and he is chosen by two people. Loren, the receptionist, makes three choices and is not chosen by any other group members. Among Jan, Tess, Evianne, and Anna are four mutual choices (see Display 5.7b), providing strong relationships. There is a high degree of emotional expansiveness within the staff with five people choosing two or more people. This is likely because of the relevance of the criteria to those in the organisation.

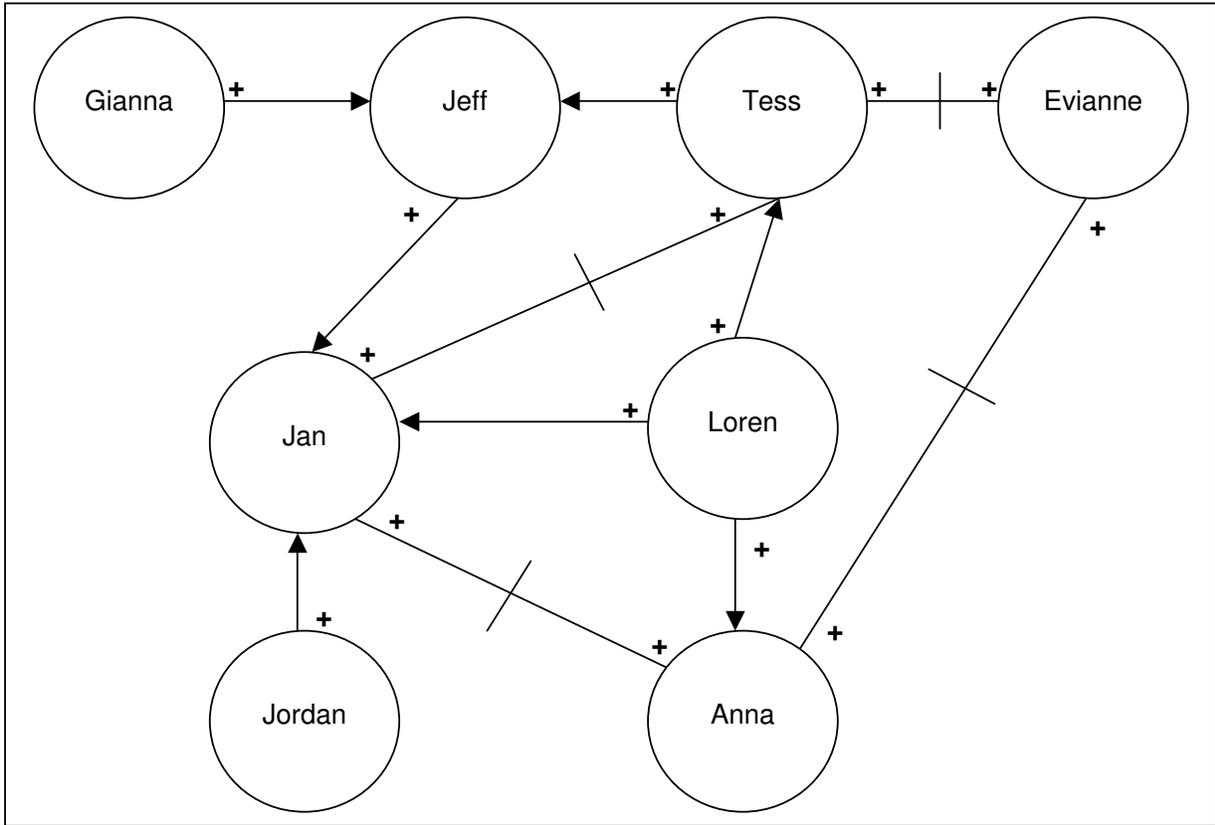
From this sociogram, we see a number of positive mutual choices, between Tess and Evianne, Tess and Jan, Jan and Anna, and Anna and Evianne. Tess, Jan, Evianne and Anna have made two or more choices which are reciprocated. These mutual choices create a circle<sup>†</sup> of relationships, which serves to provide both a strong base of support among these people and 'the social telephone wire of the

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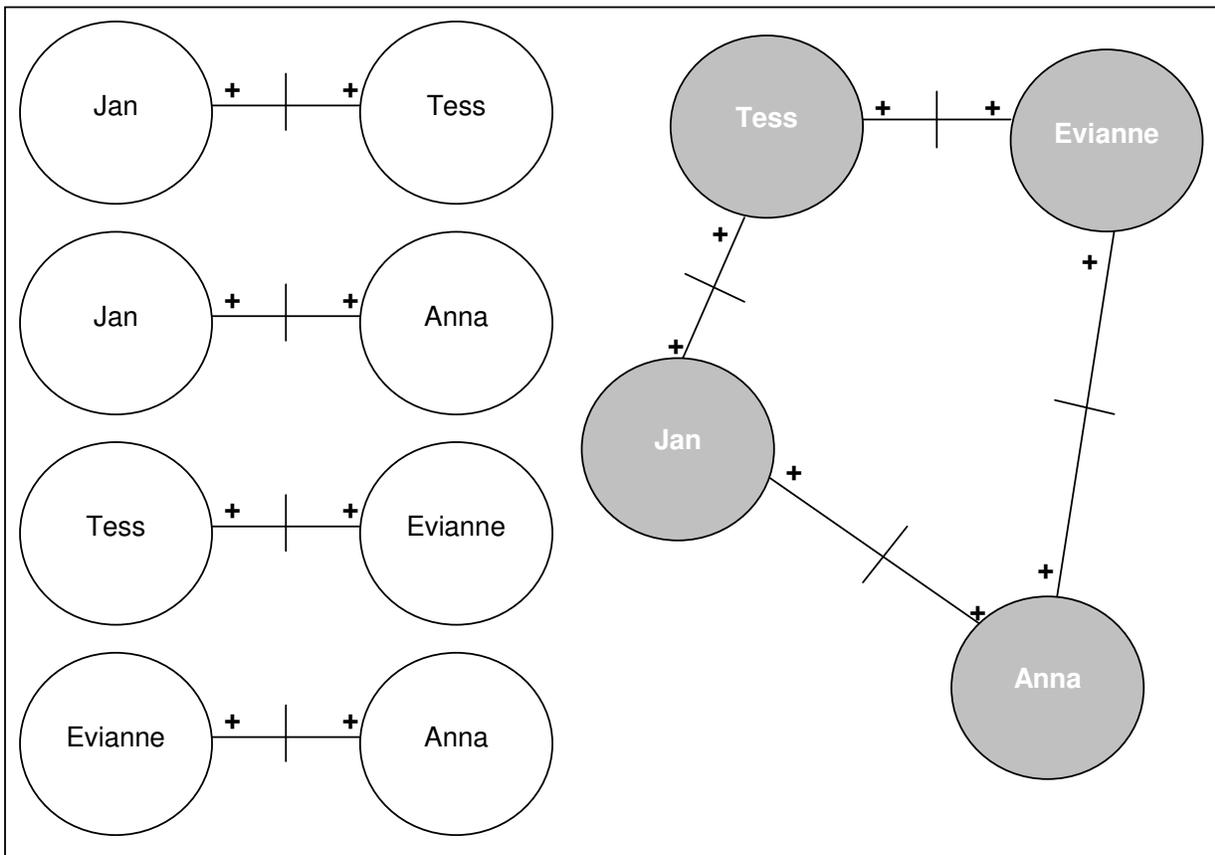
\* What is presented here is what Moreno refers to as 'near sociometry' as the information gained has been through interview rather than direct sociometric action among group members. The essential difference is to do with the degree of emotional warm-up. Obviously when group members are directly expressing their connections within the group, the emotional warm-up to each other is fuller than expressing the nature of these relationships during an interview. Moreno endorses the modification of sociometric procedures to be "adapted to any group situation as it arises:" (p73 Who Shall Survive)

† This structure (a circle) results when two are mutually attracted and one of them forms a mutual attraction with a third, and third forming a mutual attraction with a fourth - an uninterrupted flow of emotional contacts in the group. It is the natural route for indirect imitation, suggestion, gossip etc. and is influential in the forming of group attitudes. It is the social telephone wire. (p101 Moreno, Who Shall Survive? Student edition)

**5.7a The Sociogram**



**5.7b Positive mutual choices**



group.' While Tess had been rejected by the others in the management group, she has strong relationships in the staff group and is also connected into the other work group (the marketing work group) through both Jan and Anna. This connection between the two groups is important, in that it enables information to flow between the two groups. This circle of relationships further explains the dynamic of the 'staff' group withdrawing from the Directors, Gianna and Jeff.

Four relationship choices are not reciprocated: Gianna, Jeff, Loren and Jordan. Loren and Jordan identify people they go to in this circle and in this way are linked to the informal network.

Jan is the sociometric star\* (Display 5.7c) with five people choosing her, and Tess and Anna have strong sociometric positions in the group. Here we notice that Jan is the only group member chosen by Jeff, the Managing Director. In choosing Jan, Jeff also has a link with this group. However Jan does not reciprocate. This is likely to mean that Jeff does have access to information if he seeks it out, however Jan is unlikely to bring group concerns to him. This confirms Jeff's reports in the initial briefing, that he had discussed his concerns with Jan, but she was not willing to discuss details with him, preferring, as did the other staff, to have a consultant come in to work with them. Tess chooses Jeff, however this is not reciprocated. He has in fact rejected her so while she may bring her organisation concerns to him, he is unwilling to discuss them with her, which confirms the earlier briefings.

The interviews revealed that Jan was planning to leave the company. There were two main reasons. One, she had been with the company for two and a half years and felt she was not progressing professionally; opportunities which had been originally offered were not being followed through. Secondly, she was aware that there were many interpersonal difficulties which were not being handled, and sensed she was losing enjoyment of her work. She tended to hear concerns from other staff, and while she did not have a direct working relationship with Gianna, felt uncertain in her role in raising these issues with Jeff.

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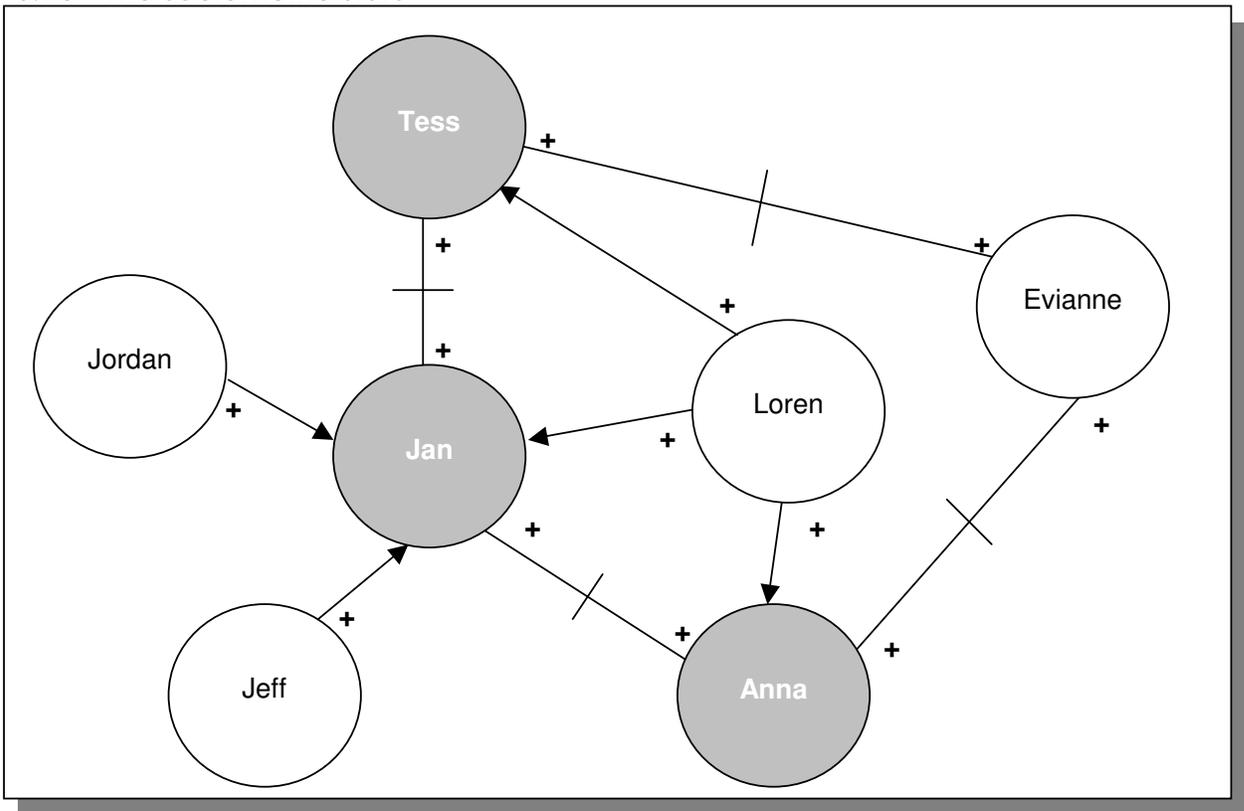
*The sociometric star is the person or people who receive the most choices on the selected criteria. When these choices are reciprocated by the chosen person, there is a solid base for interaction and leadership around the criteria chosen. In this example, the criteria are the discussion of organisational concerns, so we have a leader and a group of leaders who are highly chosen. This means there is a potential here for leadership in both the identification and resolution of organisational problems.*

Jan reported this uncertainty around Jeff and Gianna's relationship as marriage partners. She commented that Jeff frequently spoke negatively about Gianna to Jan in terms of their marriage relationship. This was something Jan felt extremely uncomfortable with. It was apparent that Jeff saw her in the role as personal confidant. Her view was that partners should support each other. She also feared that Jeff would speak negatively about her (Jan) to others if she revealed her concerns. In this environment she doubted her ability to raise these issues with Jeff in a way they might be resolved, particularly as some of her concerns centred on Gianna.

Jan provided Jeff with a crucial link in the organisation's informal network - and it was the only current link between staff and managers. This relationship too was in danger of fragmenting. Jan was the only person in the group whom Jeff currently raised his organisational concerns with. He had effectively isolated himself from Tess and while Gianna chose him, he did not choose her to discuss his concerns with. While he would hear Gianna's concerns, and together they planned a range of solutions, Jeff was effectively isolated from a wider picture of what was happening in the organisation.

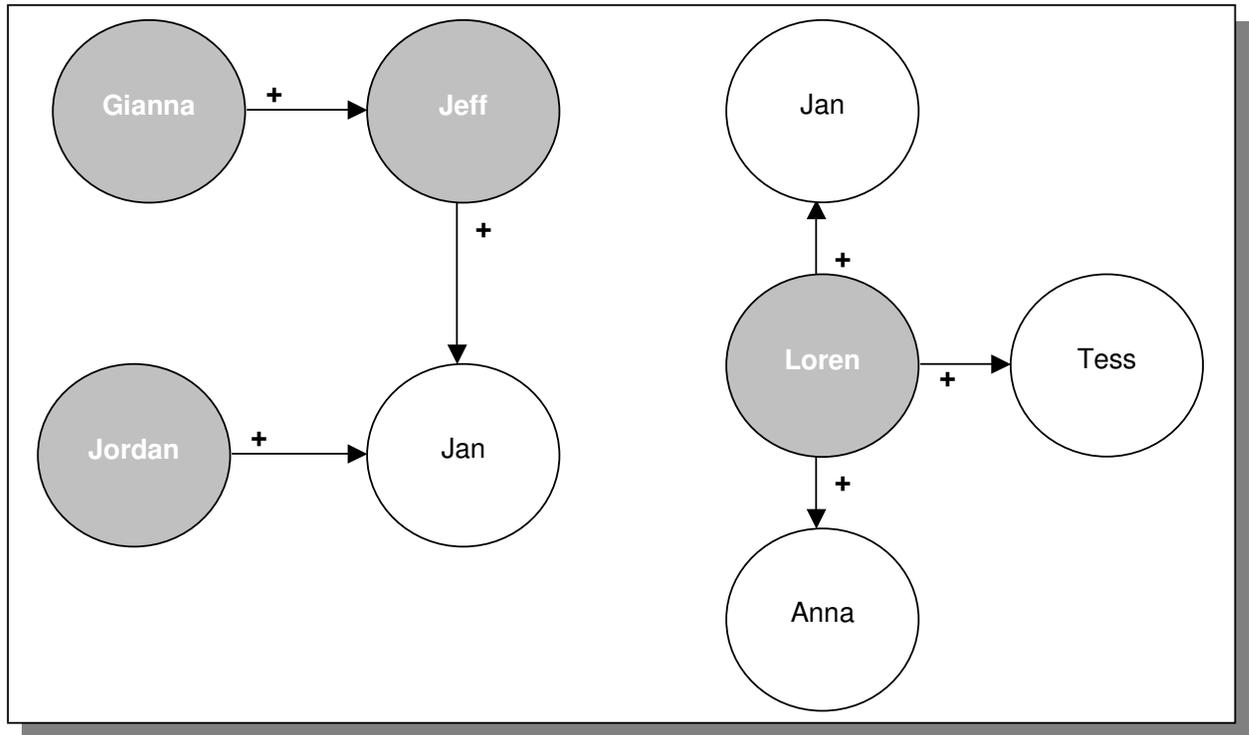
Tess and Anna are also highly chosen in the group. In being isolated from the management group Tess has been able to maintain strong relationships within the staff group. (Refer Display 5.7c)

**5.7c The sociometric stars**



There are three people, Gianna, Jordan and Loren who do not have reciprocated choices. (See Display 5.7d)

### 5.7d Unreciprocated choices



There are implications for this in the group. Loren and Jordan are relatively 'safe' in the group as they both relate to the sociometric stars and others who have strong sociometric positions. What this does mean is that while Loren is the receptionist and at the hub of the activity linking clients with staff and managers, she effectively has to seek out information from others. Jordan is the newest group member and chooses both her manager and the sociometric star (Jan).

At risk is Gianna, who chooses her co-director who does not choose her, nor is she chosen by anyone else in the group (Refer Display 5.7a). This is significant as it is the likely evidence behind the solution the two Directors came up with. While Jeff does not choose Gianna to discuss organisation problems with, he does choose her to resolve them. As she is not connected into the real problem discussion network, their information on the real concerns is inadequate.

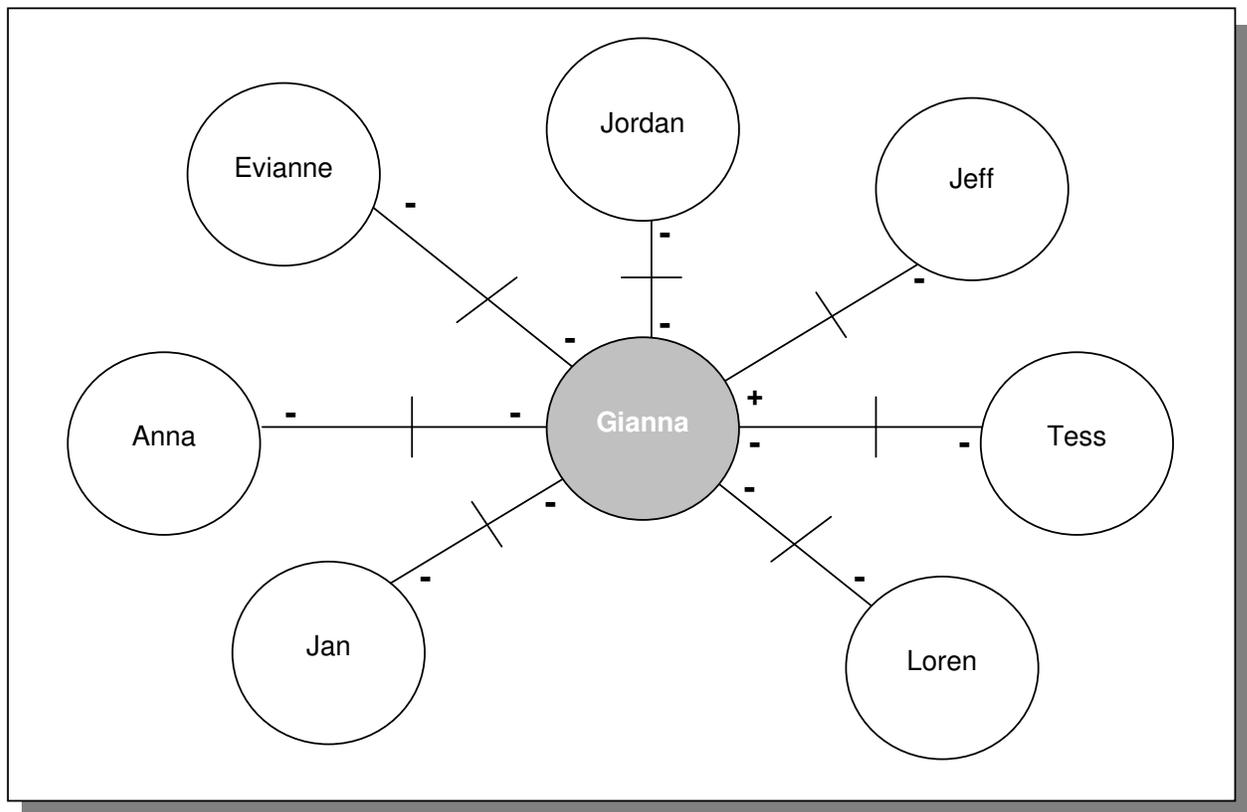
The interviews revealed some of the reasons why Gianna was not chosen. The interviews revealed that in fact she was rejected by each group member interviewed (Refer Display 5.7e). More than half those interviewed gave examples of Gianna working until 10pm and 2am and expecting staff to do the same. As a result a

number of staff used the expression, she should "get a life." When staff did work late or long hours assisting her on projects, she didn't thank them. Further examples were cited of Gianna badmouthing staff to other staff members and at public events. As a result, group members feared she would talk badly about them to others. Gianna was also responsible for paying accounts, and those with external clients reported difficulties with their client relationships as providers of services were not paid on time. It was evident that Gianna was perceived as an ineffective Director/manager and strongly disliked among the staff.

The examples of Gianna's behaviour brought to mind various roles:

- the ungrateful slave-driving workaholic
- the abusive public critic of staff
- the unreliable bill-payer
- the vicious gossip
- the resentful accuser

### 5.7e The rejected isolate



From this display, Gianna is isolated in the company, and is the star of rejection (Hale<sup>19</sup>). She has no 'companion.' The person she chooses (Jeff) does not choose her.

19. Hale, Ann E. *Conducting Clinical Sociometric Explorations*. Roanoke, Virginia, Royal Publishing Company 1981. p53

*The star of rejection, the person receiving the most negative choices, has a powerful effect on the group*

The star of rejection, the person receiving the most negative choices, has a powerful effect on the group. There are two aspects to this. The first is that in rejecting others, this person has decided not to share in the tasks or relationships with group members and therefore stymies the group members' attention to task, and the growth of the group. The second aspect is that in rejecting this person, group members do not accept the isolate in a leadership role. In this example, we have a Director of the company unwilling to develop relationships which would be part of her role as manager. Gianna is expecting to be appointed to a position in which co-operation would be essential for tasks to be achieved. Ann Hale explores what might account for such negativity by an individual in a work group:

1. Lack of acceptance of the person(s) in the implied role, eg discussion of organisation concerns
2. Desire to be clear about the lack of readiness to engage in that role with others in this point of time
3. Desire to disassociate oneself from a specific sub group and perceiving the non-acceptance of those people
4. Desiring to focus their animosities in the same direction as others. (Hale<sup>20</sup>)

Gianna appears not to see others in the role as problem solvers, and is unwilling to engage with them on this basis. In choosing Jeff, she wants to do this with him alone. This in itself is isolating, particularly as she too is one of 'the staff.'

Ann Hale speculates about the qualities of people who receive a large number of negative choices. They are people whom the group has already tended to disapprove of, or who are inappropriate in their behaviour, dress, or disliked for their hostility toward others. Again in this case study, it is my assessment that Gianna is disliked for her hostility exemplified in the roles group members described. Hale goes on to say "when a person fails to attend to the group process and be direct about the feelings he or she may be having in response to what is going on, the group may reject the person for their lack of commitment." (Hale<sup>21</sup>).

My assessment here is that there is a role conflict being enacted. Gianna wants to be in an ongoing management role in the company. However by her choices, she is only committed to problem solve as

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20. Hale, Ann E. *Conducting Clinical Sociometric Explorations*. Roanoke, Virginia, Royal Publishing Company 1981. p53

21. *ibid*

a Director with her Co-Director and not with group members. They in turn isolate her in any problem discussion processes they have. She is therefore, by her own choice, not a part of the problem solving structure of the organisation.

While as a Director in the initial briefing, Gianna noted that the group relies heavily on co-operation, she did not choose any of her work colleagues to discuss her work concerns with, and vice versa. Rather if she spoke to staff, it was to be critical of staff members who have positive relationships with each other. This behaviour has quite an impact on the group, and their ability to problem solve, and was in large part the focus of my subsequent interventions with this company.

*workplace  
agreements had  
been eroded,  
overlooked,  
ignored, or  
transgressed*

The interviews also revealed that a number of workplace agreements had been eroded, overlooked, ignored, or transgressed over the past months. Some of these were to do with payment for overtime, meals being provided if staff members worked additional evening hours, promised bonuses for services, and additional training promised. The impact of these transgressions was that staff no longer trusted the managers, and were suspicious of them. As a result of this, a number of the staff felt resentful and less co-operative. These findings formed the content of the pending workshop.

The first set of findings were not surprising given the background to the project. However the strength and vehemence of the dislike focused on Gianna, were a surprise to me. My assessment of the results of all this research and analysis was that if there was any action to end Tess's employment, Jan was likely to leave too. If both these group members left, it was likely that the current internal structure of the group would become unstable, ie others would leave and therefore jeopardise the company. I formed this view as a result of the relationships between Tess and Jan, and the rest of the group. From the Sociogram (Displays 5.7a, b, c, d, e) and the interviews I affirmed that the next action was to repair and strengthen the working relationships in the group.

I then implemented the remainder of Intervention 2 in reporting the findings to Jeff and then to the group the following day. I decided to show the sociogram 5.7a to Jeff: My decision was that this was management information, for Jeff as Managing Director to work with one of his staff, ie Gianna. I was again coaching him in the role of staff developer. He was interested in the sociogram and not surprised with the findings regarding Gianna. He and I agreed he would present this information directly to her in the form I had reported to him.

My thinking was that we could rely on the positive relationships which existed between these two in their Co-Director functions and manager-staff functions to handle this sensitive information. The feedback would be presented managerially within the organisation. My decision not to be the carrier of this information meant that responsibility for direct feedback and honesty remained within the organisation.

It was the nature of these inter-relationships which helped me design Intervention 3, the workshop, focusing on building relationships between people which would enable the group to work on business agreements.

### ***The results: Intervention 2***

The group members were relieved by the presentation of the results which confirmed what they had felt as individuals and discussed in their small groups. It was as if the 'truth' had been revealed: working conditions had deteriorated, agreements had not been kept, trust between managers and staff had been lost, and relationships had soured. The staff responded positively to the presentation and were relieved that what they had experienced and had discussed was indeed happening.

*the 'truth' had  
been revealed*

Again, this was a critical moment in the project and new roles began to emerge. It was the moment when group members felt validated, more united as a group and more able to warm up to a fuller range of roles. They were excited that their assessments were accurate, optimistic that if there was a shared view of what was happening, there was likelihood of shared resolutions with the Directors. The Directors warmed up more to having a fuller overview of their organisation and responded to this as a stage of development in the organisation. Group members were beginning to warm up to positive tele where it had previously been negative. All those in the group moved towards the proposed workshop with goodwill and hope.

### ***The results: Interventions 3 and 4***

Several working agreements were made during the workshop:

- Personal apologies were made by both Co-Directors. Group members perceived these apologies coming from the Managing Director and the Production Assistant. Work agreements were reinstated regarding acceptable overtime hours per day and agreements were made for longer hours. Promised bonuses were paid.

- Both Tess and Gianna were identified by group members as project managers on specific projects. Team members were chosen from both groups. Tess and Gianna, as team leaders, were responsible for keeping their teams informed of progress and priorities.
- Two group meetings per week were scheduled; one on Mondays facilitated by the Managing Director to resolve the concerns which were placed on the agenda at the workshop, the second, facilitated by group members on Fridays which included information sharing on new clients, updates on existing work, and timelines for the next week -what's urgent, what's not and expected overtime for the upcoming week.

I was deeply satisfied with these results. The leadership from Jeff as Managing Director has been strengthened as he takes greater responsibility to ensure that working agreements are kept, and that problems are resolved. Gianna's role as project manager in the organisation is more responsive to the way work is organised in the group. The forums to discuss and resolve problems are aligned with the staff's concerns and owned by both the formal and informal in the organisation.

## 5.8 Summary

My original hypothesis about dysfunction in the organisation was confirmed. It was useful to me as a sociometrist and organisation consultant to understand that when communications networks in a work group are depleted the workers' abilities to contribute to the work of the organisation diminishes and the life of the group grinds to a halt. This may be attributed to negative tele and 'social death' of a group member. It is important that each group member has at least one positive relationship in the group. If this is not present, the work of the group tends to focus on interpersonal relationship difficulties, rather than business tasks. This study revealed that while it appeared that one group member (Tess) was isolated by the Directors in the company, the informal network of relationships held her strongly within the group. She was a key group member in the informal network.

What the informal network of relationships did reveal was that a different group member (Gianna) was isolated. While this group member was involved in many of the company's activities she was isolated in her relationships. This meant she shared little of her work, worked long hours, felt overloaded and became resentful, and

developed negative relationships with her 'companions' in the company. It was the impact of this that was to bring the life of the group to a halt. It is not only the work of the isolated group member which was affected by negative relationships, it was the work of all group members who increasingly focused their attention on the problems and relationships in the business rather than on the business tasks. Had the plan of the Company Directors to end Tess's employment and have Gianna as Creative Director been enacted at the time of this project, it was likely that the company would have disintegrated. Not only was Gianna isolated, but also Jan was likely to leave the company if Tess did and the Directors did not have the working managerial relationships necessary to bind the staff into a cohesive working group.

*It is important  
that each group  
member has at  
least one positive  
relationship in  
the group*

As a result of the workshop, a forum for ongoing problem solving in the organisation was established, staff and managers functions were clarified and a forum for the ongoing information sharing and management of work was reinstated and developed. Tess was reinstated to her managerial function with group members, and Gianna was recognised by the group as taking on the managerial role as project leader within the organisation from time to time.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIOMETRISTS WHO WORK AS ORGANISATION CONSULTANTS

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The implications for sociometrists who work as organisation consultants can be summarised in three areas: organisation development, development of managers, and the role of sociometry practitioners.

### 6.1 Organisation development

*...at certain points in the life of the organisation, there will be moments of development*

If we think of an organisation as a system with boundaries, purposes and functions, it is possible to see that at certain points in the life of the organisation, there will be moments of development. The organisation will be confronted with interactions and events not previously experienced. Some examples might include new markets opening up, industrial action in response to changing working conditions, or products or services becoming irrelevant.

For organisations to survive and flourish, these events need to be responded to, and managed in a way that builds relationships. For this to happen, a new approach and new skills are sometimes needed, for example:

- Greater ability to develop vision and gain alignment is required
- Solutions being generated by floor staff need to be implemented by managers
- Collective problem identification and problem solving may need to be established
- Alliances may need to be formed with previous competitors

These skills imply people working together in new ways.

In New Zealand over the past ten years there has been significant organisation restructuring in an attempt to respond to changing global and internal economic and market forces. Much of this restructuring has attended to formal organisation structure, functions and relationships. As a result, large numbers of people have been made redundant, long time colleagues and associates now work in different organisations, and some staff now manage their previous managers. One result of all of this has been a breakdown of the traditional informal network of relationships. This has been compounded by managerial and senior executive appointments being made by external consultants who base their assessments on psychological profiles and assess performance in

*It is no longer  
enough to rely  
solely on those  
appointed to  
managerial roles  
to identify and  
solve  
organisation  
problems*

simulated organisation events and interviews. Frequently what has been omitted has been assessment of the appointee's relationships in the organisation or their managerial ability to develop and maintain strong co-operative working relationships with a wide range of people.

While there may be clarification of the formal organisation systems, e.g. development of strategic and business plans, reporting systems, and problem identification, these systems are usually driven by managers with a clarity of purpose, which in my experience, excludes the facilitation of informal networks of working relationships. It is the informal network of working relationships which actually determines the productivity and satisfaction of the organisation. Where organisations have experienced difficulty in implementing change programmes it is likely to be either because the informal network of relationships has been underdeveloped, or because managers have relied on their formal function in the organisation to get things done, and did not have adequate links into informal information networks.

## **6.2 The development of managers**

This means that it is increasingly important for both managers and staff to be alert to, and able to work with the informal network of relationships. It is no longer enough to rely solely on those appointed to managerial roles to identify and solve organisation problems. Managers need to be assisted to find ways of working so that they are able to draw together the informal networks of people and continue to strengthen working relationships between staff, and between managers and staff through organisation action. And staff need to find ways they can communicate their interests, ideas and concerns to managers, and trust that these things will be worked with.

## **6.3 The sociometrist as facilitator, coach and educator**

*...it is our role to  
find ways to  
share  
what we know*

As sociometry practitioners it is our role to find ways to share what we know with those working in organisations. We need to bring forward the body of knowledge of applied sociometry in simple and practical ways. We can do this by building relationships as we facilitate learning and organisation events; by discussing our thinking with clients as we use sociometric methods as interventions; by making the invisible visible and by being willing to work alongside managers and staff with the complexities that both isolation and co-operation create within organisations.

## 7. CONCLUSION

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*Moreno's  
methods and  
concepts provide  
powerful tools for  
sociometrists*

Moreno's concept of informal networks of relationships assists the sociometrist to analyse problems in organisations. The influence of informal networks in contributing towards a productive working organisation becomes apparent when sociometric analysis and organisation interventions are carried out in organisations. Moreno's methods and concepts provide powerful tools for sociometrists working as consultants both in assessing problems, and designing interventions for organisation development. The impact of using these methods is that group members become united in themselves and able to warm up to functional roles. This results in work groups creating new relationships and new responses to conflicts. Organisations willing to work with both the formal and informal networks are more likely to produce work groups focused on activity and tasks they find satisfying and have natural affinity for.

Isolation in organisations, exemplified by people withdrawing from their work tasks and relationships, impacts on work groups, stymies the work of the group, and decreases satisfaction and productivity. By displaying the positive and negative tele relationships associated with relevant and specified criteria, sociometrists and group members can make sound assessments about how to approach such conflicts and be confident that interventions will produce greater resourcefulness in resolving conflicts in organisations.

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