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## Messing About in Problems

An Informal Structured Approach to their  
Identification and Management

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# Messing About in Problems

## An Informal Structured Approach to their Identification and Management

by

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PERGAMON PRESS

OXFORD · NEW YORK · BEIJING · FRANKFURT · SÃO PAULO · SYDNEY  
TOKYO · TORONTO

U.K.	Pergamon Press, Headington Hill Hall, Oxford OX3 0BW, England
U.S.A.	Pergamon Press, Maxwell House, Fairview Park, Elmsford, New York 10523, U.S.A.
PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA	Pergamon Press, Room 4037, Qianmen Hotel, Beijing, People's Republic of China
FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY	Pergamon Press, Hammerweg 6, D-6242 Kronberg, Federal Republic of Germany
BRAZIL	Pergamon Editora, Rua Eça de Queiros, 346, CEP 04011, Paraiso, São Paulo, Brazil
AUSTRALIA	Pergamon Press Australia, P.O. Box 544, Potts Point, N.S.W. 2011, Australia
JAPAN	Pergamon Press, 8th Floor, Matsuoka Central Building, 1-7-1 Nishishinjuku, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160, Japan
CANADA	Pergamon Press Canada, Suite No 271, 253 College Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5T 1R5

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First edition 1983

Reprinted 1988

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Eden, Colin.

Messing about in problems.

(Frontiers of operational research and applied systems analysis; v. 1) (Pergamon international library of science, technology, engineering, and social studies)  
Includes bibliographical references.

1. Problem solving. I. Jones, Sue. II. Sims, David.  
III. Title. IV. Series. V. Series: Pergamon international library of science, technology, engineering and social studies.

HD30.29.E3 1983 658.4'03 82-25967

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Eden, Colin.

Messing about in problems.—(Frontiers of operational research and applied systems analysis; v. 1).—(Pergamon international library)

1. Operations research

I. Title II. Jones, Sue III. Sims, David,

1948— IV. Series

001.4'24 T57.6

ISBN 0-08-029961-X (Hardcover)

ISBN 0-08-029960-1 (Flexicover)

## Preface

All OR practitioners, and indeed all professional investigators, learn early in their careers that the problems facing them are not neatly packaged, nor do solutions fall out as if they were puzzles in a daily newspaper. They find themselves in a 'mess' — to use Ackoff's phrase — in which uncertainty and conflict are the essence of the problem rather than a nuisance element to be eliminated before the real work begins. Colin Eden and his team at Bath University have pioneered research in this area for many years, based on direct consulting experience. This book brings together this experience in a comprehensive and readable form, which makes it useful reading for all, whether they are professional investigators or not, who have to attempt to unravel problems in an organizational context.

ROLFE TOMLINSON

General Editor

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## *Introduction*

This book is aimed at all those working in and around organizations who are interested in ways of thinking systematically and creatively about messy problems, whether their own or other people's, they are called upon to help with. It is about the ideas, approaches and methods we have developed over the past few years out of working with individuals and groups who see their problems as complicated, messy, not readily quantifiable, but who nevertheless would like some systematic analysis techniques to manage them. It is not intended to offer ideas which supplant those already found useful, quantitative or qualitative. Rather we are suggesting ways of thinking about problems, and techniques to handle them, which may be complementary to others by retaining the explicitness of many quantitative techniques alongside the sensitivity and flexibility of some qualitative techniques.

We want to introduce our ideas to the interested layman as well as to the social scientist, consultant, or psychologist. Nevertheless, the book is mostly aimed at those persons in organizations who believe it is their business to be a service to others by helping them think more explicitly and deliberately about the problems they face. In organizations we can identify large numbers of people who depend, for their own satisfaction and for their occupational well-being, upon being seen as 'helpful' to others. They are mostly people with a service or staff function. In most organizations they are found in departments such as marketing services, personnel services, training, corporate planning, organizational development, operational research, systems analysis, internal consultancy and management services. Each of these groups depends, in part, for their success upon their ability and skills at understanding the nature of the problems their clients own and finding a role within the context of their expertise and the problem as the client sees it.

There is, however, another group of persons who might find the ideas contained in this book helpful. Several writers, including Galbraith and Toffler, have discussed the way in which increasing specialization may lead to organizations being structured around semi-permanent project teams. It is common for leaders of such teams to face considerable difficulties in effectively managing the ideas and decisions within an interdisciplinary team. The methods we develop in this book have shown themselves to be particularly helpful to project team leaders.

It is traditional for authors to use the introductory chapter to provide an overview of the contents, and a guide to the options open to the reader. We shall do this, but more importantly we want to give warning of what each chapter is trying to get you to believe -- what points of view we wish to indoctrinate into your thinking and your practical problem helping.

Chapter 1 describes a world of organizational life which will most probably be recognizable to you, and can act as a contextual setting for the remainder of the book. Most books on the nature of organizations choose to describe the formal and structural aspect of the organization as a system. We shall not write about organizations in this way because we do not believe that these aspects are the most relevant to understanding the nature of problems which in our experience belong to individuals or small groups. We shall argue that organizations are social entities where problems are to do not with objectivities and organizational goals but subjectivities and negotiated orientations. Problems and decision-making are predominantly set within politics, interpersonal considerations, idiosyncratic values, and personal perspectives. The view we present is not original -- indeed it is common sense -- but it is unusual as the context for a book on problem-solving. Our view is thus that notions of 'rationality' and 'objectivity' in organizational decision-making are unhelpful to developing ways of helping people with their problems.

At the end of Chapter 1 we begin a case study example which unfolds throughout the rest of the book as a practical illustration of the ideas set out in each chapter. This is intended to add a context for those ideas to help readers imagine how they might put them into effect in their own working environment.

The second chapter establishes the link between our view of organizations and the problems that belong to people and small groups. We shall try to demonstrate that problems are psychological entities which are often unclear and expressed as anxiety and concern about a situation as well as being expressed as a positive wish for the situation to be different in a particular way. Problems are idiosyncratic constructions that belong to individuals and not to the 'world out there'. We shall consider possible approaches to the relationship between a problem-helper and his client, and argue that a view of problems as personal constructions leads to adopting a negotiative, rather than coercive or empathetic paradigm for problem-helping. We also suggest that a process of assisting the defining and formulation of a problem is a crucial and often neglected precursor to any attempts to solve it. This means that the starting point for helping with problems is through devising a way of listening to the problem-owner which will mean that it is possible to see the world from his point of view. The art of listening is not at all easy and needs the development of particular skills.

The third chapter specifically considers ways of listening to a problem in such a way that a model or representation of the ideas, beliefs, images, and values can be fed back. We do not presume that all individuals either want to, or are able to,

articulate the subjective view they have of a problem. We therefore introduce a range of techniques for helping the helper encourage the communication of the important aspects of the problem. The tendency for organizationally based problems to be expressed in the light of particular norms, or not to be expressed because of subjectivity, lack of evidence, or politics and interpersonal considerations is considered. The chapter brings together a range of interviewing methods and modelling techniques whose origins range from counselling to methods for analysing qualitative data. We consider forms of mapping thinking that actively involve the problem-owner which we have been developing over the past seven years. Our objective is to convince you that understanding a problem as someone else sees it needs consideration and original methods for recording what you hear when you listen -- to both verbal and non-verbal elements of a problem description.

Chapter 4 is a continuation of Chapter 3 and considers the technique we have developed and called 'cognitive mapping' as a method for modelling ideas, beliefs, and values. The map is an explicit basis for negotiation between the problem-helper and his client about the content and structure of his problem. It enables the explication and analysis of complex beliefs and values and is a working record of the problem as it changes and moves (towards solution). The model-building technique can often be used by individuals to help themselves think about a problem. And it can be taken as the basis for the development of a numerically related model for analysis by the construction of computer simulation models which are understood by, and believable to, both the problem-owner and the helper. We shall be suggesting that cognitive mapping is a simple and effective technique for modelling and analysing a person's problem. We shall want you to see it as a sensible reflection of the arguments we shall have previously developed on the nature of organizations and the nature of problems, and to see it as a practical and yet a good reflection of the theory of decision-making.

Chapter 5 moves on to considering the situation of a problem-helper who is working with a team of individuals. A view of problems as personal, often idiosyncratic, constructions, set within an organizational context of internal politics and interpersonal relations, means that the problem-helper is confronted by a great deal of complexity. It means that he cannot treat the team as if it were a single individual with a single set of objectives and one problem definition. The likely existence of different objectives, different perspectives, and internal politics within a team means that the problem-helper will need to pay careful attention to thinking about, and negotiating, the nature of his intervention within a team. We shall also suggest that the problem-helper and team will be helped by methods of listening which facilitate holding on to and working with perhaps widely different interests and knowledge in a particular situation.

Chapter 6 expands this approach by looking at the way modelling can be used for creative problem-solving in teams. Cognitive maps can be used to keep hold



of ideas as they arise in team meetings, to relate the ideas of one person to those of others and facilitate a jointly agreed problem definition. Our experience suggests that models of thinking which are constructed by a helper with all members of a team can be an extremely helpful method for sharing and checking assumptions, and for making creative use of individual experience and wisdom. We have been involved with groups who have wanted help in constructing imaginative possibilities for the future of their organization; a group wanting to devise and implement solutions to local unemployment; publishers wanting to create adventurous policies to sustain the editorial future of a magazine; probation officers wanting to manage their own team more effectively; a research team who felt they had problems of motivation; and with many other groups. In all these cases seeing problems as belonging to individuals, being set within a political arena, and as things needing careful listening using models have been the crucial elements in a successful team intervention. We shall attempt to show that the techniques and theories we have applied can be usefully set amongst behavioural science-based interventions where the management of interpersonal dynamics is the crucial element.

Chapter 7 represents a break from the type of material presented so far; we consider the relationship between modelling subjective and personal ideas and beliefs and mathematical modelling. In recent years the systems movement has been active in introducing approaches to the modelling of 'soft' systems but there is still a predominance of mathematically complex models published in the literature of Operational Research and Systems Analysis. We believe that there is much that can be achieved by blending the type of models we have discussed in the previous chapters with the need that often arises where a problem-owner wishes to go further into the numerical implications of his thinking. We introduce one of the methods (System Dynamics simulation modelling) that can be used to help the problem-owner follow the move from a model such as a cognitive map to a computer simulation model. Thus mathematical models can be set within qualitative considerations and built so that the problem-owner(s) feel committed to the results of the modelling activity. In this way the mathematical model and qualitative model enhance each other so that relevant problem solving help is provided.

After Chapter 8, the concluding chapter, we discuss in an appendix new computer software especially designed to help in the construction of cognitive maps, in their analysis, and in the merging of several maps into a single map. The software, which is written in FORTRAN, is essentially an extremely high-level language which can be used simply and interactively by the non-computer person. It represents many man-years of development and field testing and has the potential for bringing self-help in thinking about problems through the power of modern computing technology.

We have written the book so that it does not have to be read from cover to cover. The reader can stop at any point and be able to use the material he has

read without relying on the subsequent chapters. What has been read can stand alone from what follows. For example, some managers may choose to stop after Chapter 3, project team leaders would probably want to read at least to Chapter 5, and so on. Some experience or grounding in mathematical modelling techniques will help in appreciating the significance of Chapter 8, although it does not require any mathematics to understand the contents. All readers might find the appendix on the use of computer software interesting and understandable whether or not they have read Chapter 6.

sabedoria  
= inteligência  
= bom senso

insuficiente

inventor  
= planejador  
= [imaginar]

prática (período de experiência)

→ tentaremos

eficazmente

→ desemprego

sação de ouvir

→ estabilidade

→ provavelmente

→ entre, [com] [motivação] com

ruptura

→ subjetiva modelação

domo do problema

→ mudar

= distância

mutuamente

desta maneira

= assim

desta forma

interpersonal

até agora

subjetiva modelação

## *Distinct Perspectives and Political Concerns*

Consider the following account.

John Smith is a marketing manager in a division of a large manufacturing company. Ian Brown the division's newly appointed marketing director. John Smith had just been to a meeting of the marketing department, the first with its new director. The appointment had not been a great surprise. Most people had assumed that Ian would get the job after his predecessor Brian Jones had been promoted to Head Office. In the three years since he had joined the division, Ian's area had been particularly successful, with two major and successful new product launches. He also had exactly the right kind of personality, John mused, aggressive, dynamic, self-confident. Personally John did not like him and thought he could be an 'absolute bastard' at times, but John had to admit that he was good at his job. Furthermore, with the successor to Ian's old job still undecided it would be stupid to 'get on the wrong side' of the man, even if his own chances of getting the job were, at this stage, remote. Anyway, he thought, the meeting had not been the exciting event everyone had been expecting, although the fact that no announcements had been made about the successor would be bound to get everybody talking. In the meeting Ian had just gone over the future plans and there was nothing new, the usual policy statements about the fact that the division was strong in some markets, weak in others and efforts to find new products would continue to have a high priority.

Peter Williams, responsible for the industrial products section, had put forward his usual argument that the problems in his area had little to do with the division's (i.e. his) efforts and much more to do with overall adverse market conditions. There was no doubt that he was probably right and Ian had not openly disagreed, though he had cut Peter short in the middle of his 'spiel'. (Peter did tend to go on a bit.)

As John walked down the corridor Martin Evans, the promotions co-ordinator, came up to him. "What did you think of that, then?" he asked. "O.K.," John grunted, guardedly, turning into his office. Martin was one of those people he disliked and distrusted. His efforts to impress Ian in the meeting had been so obvious as to be almost amusing John thought.

As John sat down Alan Dixon came in. Alan was the new-products manager



and a good friend both in and outside work. He was looking anxious. "Didn't like the sound of all that", he said. "I reckon we are all going to be under the microscope now. Did you notice how he looked at me when he said we should pay more attention to exploiting names in development? (John hadn't.) You know how much trouble I had convincing Brian that we should keep separate identities for products in different market segments. I thought I had won that one. Now it looks as if I'll have to go through it all over again. I tell you, if he starts trying to change things radically in my area, it will be a disaster. And what about the way he was getting at Peter? I think he is definitely going to try to give Peter the push. . . ."

### THE INDIVIDUALITY OF REALITY

Although this scene is an imagined one, we hope that what it describes believably captures some of the flavour of organizational life as most of us experience it.

We left John and his friend Alan in the middle of discussing what had 'gone on' in the meeting they had both just attended. It is clear that Alan had placed an interpretation upon the events occurring in that meeting, in terms of potential significance for him, quite different from that belonging to John. His interpretation had led him to feel distinctly anxious about the future behaviour of the new marketing director. John, on the other hand, had found the meeting rather uneventful. We may even suppose that he had been disappointed that it had not been more exciting. Are we 'rigging' the story? Of course. Yet we would ask you to consider how often when 'comparing notes' with colleagues after a meeting you find that each person will recall different aspects of the meeting, place different emphases on different aspects, or interpret the implications of the meeting in different ways. Sometimes the differences can be so significant that it hardly seems that the same meeting is being discussed.

The point that we wish to make here is so obvious that it appears almost trivial. Different people interpret situations in different ways. We have much in common with others in our social worlds -- language, shared beliefs about the nature of things and relationships between them, and shared norms about what we should or should not do. Many of these come to have a meaning so institutionalized that they are taken to be 'matters of fact'.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless our individual histories are unique to each of us. Different people interpret situations in different ways because they bring to a situation their own particular mental 'framework' of

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed and important analysis of the relationship between 'subjective' and 'objective' realities and knowledge see Berger and Luckmann (1966). Another useful but difficult book in this context is by Silverman (1970) who describes and evaluates several different perspectives for understanding organizations, including his own orientation to the nature of actions as arising from the meaning individuals ascribe to events (see particularly Chapter 6).

personal beliefs, attitudes, hypotheses, prejudices, expectations, personal values and objectives, with which they can make sense of (place an interpretation upon) the situation.<sup>2</sup> Thus they pay attention to certain things, ignore others, and regard some as having a particular significance for themselves in the future.

Returning to our example, this perspective would lead us to suggest that different recollections of a meeting by different individuals, has less to do with one person having a 'better' memory than another than with how those individuals differently made sense of the meeting in terms of their particular mental frameworks. That is to say, individuals' recollections of a meeting and interpretations of what was significant within it come from their own beliefs and expectations -- for example, about the world of things and people in general, about meetings in their organization, about the people there and their intentions -- and from the future implications they see in the meeting for themselves in terms of their values and objectives.

These projected implications in turn lead to actions, or non-actions, to avoid undesirable consequences and move towards, or maintain, certain desired states of affairs that are a reflection of personal values and objectives. The 'model' of man we have and feel comfortable with is thus not of an organism responding to some 'stimulus', nor 'driven' by internal needs or instincts, nor of a person whose thinking and actions are socially 'given'. Rather it is of a human being who acts in the light of the personal interpretations or constructions he places upon events, in a process of 'scientific' enquiry about his reality so that it be, not a random unpredictable place, but one of order and meaning over which he may have some control.<sup>3</sup>

### AN ORGANIZATION OF HUMAN BEINGS

Much of a person's hypothesizing about his world will be about the other human beings that make up that world. He will be concerned to understand what makes other people 'tick' as much as is enough for him to manage his interactions with them to his own satisfaction.

In the scenario described earlier we learned that John, the main protagonist, disliked his new boss but respected him for his competence, disliked and distrusted one of his colleagues and therefore avoided discussing his feelings about the meeting with him, but was involved in a close and friendly relationship with another who had dropped in immediately after the meeting for a 'post-mortem' on it. The point we wish to draw out here is that individuals in organizations are involved, as elsewhere, in complicated social relationships where they dislike,

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the nature of beliefs and values see Chapter 3 in Eden, Jones and Sims (1979). See also Young (1977) and Rokeach (1973).

<sup>3</sup> Our model of man is based significantly on the work of the cognitive psychologist Neisser (1976), the sociologists Thomas and Thomas' (1928) notion of 'defining the situation' and in particular Kelly's Theory of Personal Constructs (1955).



like, care about, find boring, are rude to, dismiss, fear, even fall in and out of love with, other members of the organizations. Much of their energy is spent in handling these relationships and in developing some understanding of those others in order to do so (and a large proportion of time is spent in, and enjoyment derived from, gossiping about other people).

So called 'irrationalities' of personal evaluations of other people as those who 'get up my nose' or 'bore the pants off me' have a great deal more influence on decisions which involve those people than perhaps we would care to admit. Thus, for example, we know that being liked by the boss is at least as important as being seen by him as competent, in terms of what we might be able to persuade him to do.<sup>4</sup> Most of the time our own behaviour and that of others is not reflected upon or managed in a particularly self-conscious way. We are usually as human beings extremely competent in dealing with all the nuances, variations, surprising twists and turns of interactions with other people. Brief discontinuities, moments of uncomfortableness in an otherwise satisfactory or, to us, unimportant relationship rarely represent serious problems for us.

However, there clearly are times when we see events in relationships with others as having significant implications that we do not like. Indeed there is a large body of professional practice concerned with teaching about, or intervening in, 'interpersonal' problems in organizations. Often it is assumed that there is some relatively straightforward demarcation between such 'interpersonal' problems and other kinds of problems. That such a demarcation is rarely, if ever, clear cut is one of the points we hope our example illustrates.

#### POLITICAL CONCERNS

John and his friend Alan had been ruminating about what Ian Brown, the new director, being the sort of man they believed him to be, and in the light of the things he had said in the meeting, might do in the future which would have implications for their life in the organization. In his new role Ian had suddenly become someone of much greater significance than in the past. The meeting had left Alan feeling anxious and we can readily imagine him spending no small amount of mental energy on attempting to predict exactly what Ian's future actions might be with respect to himself. He will probably attempt to 'suss' out the opinions and feelings of various colleagues. He will probably consider what strategies he might use to prevent Ian from interfering in ways that he does not like, and so on. We are touching here upon that category of activities in which individuals engage with respect to one another known as organizational politics. Specifically, self-consciously and according to some personal sense of a desired end to be served, they seek to gain other people's support for, or prevent them from hindering, certain states of affairs relating to those ends.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the significance of personal relationships and what he terms 'particularism' in organizational decision-making see Perrow (1972).

To do this, individuals will seek to ensure that other people hold the definition of a situation that they want them to hold. They can do this in several ways. For example, they will sometimes attempt to persuade through the power of 'rational' argument, or through the self-evident merit of their image of desired ends or means, or by appeal to their own 'superior' expertise. Sometimes they will lie, cheat and attempt to manipulate. In either case they will be selective about what information they reveal and order its presentation in particular ways according to their own understanding of what is likely to be most persuasive to the particular people concerned. They will usually present their argument as reflecting a concern for the 'good' of the organization, or at least of those particular people. Often they will believe this to be so, sometimes they will not, but to admit otherwise would be to break one of the cardinal rules of the organizational political game that of admitting to 'selfish' motives. The essence of this rule is not that people actually believe others to be unselfish, indeed usually quite the opposite. Simply that there appears to be an almost 'fact of the matter' norm among members of most organizations that it is illegitimate to admit to personal ends.

Because individuals with distinct perspectives and political concerns rarely reach complete agreement about ends and means, compromise outcomes are often negotiated or bargains struck about favours to be exchanged at different times.<sup>5</sup> Alliances will be formed, some relatively stable and enduring, others relatively short term. The energetic will spend considerable effort and time in finding out what others do want and think on a particular issue. (Often this involves a game-like process in which both parties know what is going on, are ready to be involved in what is going on, but do not acknowledge openly that they are participating in a lobbying process.) They will 'chat up' those they regard as powerful, not for any particular purpose but still with some strategic conception that such activities will bear fruit later in some particular context.<sup>6</sup> And they will do these things because they seek, as reasonable men and women, to pursue what they regard as right and best. It is important to be clear that organizational politics is not the sole territory of self-interested manipulators, megalomaniacs or charlatans.

#### THE CONTEXT FOR POLITICS

These activities are carried out within the context of the rules, procedures, norms, language and established structures of power within an organization,

<sup>5</sup> For an interesting analysis of the difficulty in distinguishing between means and ends in the pursuit of goals and objectives see Ackoff (1979).

<sup>6</sup> For a book which describes in detail the internal political aspects of organizational decision-making using the case study of the purchase of a computer see Pettigrew (1973). Another fascinating case is described, almost in the form of a novel, by Jones and Lakin (1978).



which serve to define the way things are done, the way to get things done, and often the way things 'just self-evidently are'. A successful political actor is usually one who knows the norms and the rules of his particular organizational game, some of which will be laid down in manuals, many of which are not. He will know which rules he must follow and which he can break through reference to another set.

Thus, for example, he will know that even if he is not unself-consciously a particularly energetic, assertive or decisive individual he should be seen to be so by 'the right people', if that is the valued persona in his particular organization. He will have learnt this by observing the behaviour of those who have received rewards in contrast to those who have tended to be ignored or 'punished', relating his observations to the language used to describe 'good' decision-makers, 'not so good' and 'bloody hopeless'. Often he will come to 'own' these bases for evaluation himself, as John had, in our example, unquestioningly appreciated Ian's 'go-getting' competence. If he is particularly effective he will adopt different personae with different groups at different times, but skilfully, to retain enough consistency that he is not likely to be branded as 'two-faced'.

He will know that he must present proposals within the language and the broad goal framework that top management have laid down as good for the organization, often themselves following what has gone before and become institutionalized as appropriate. He will have access to, if he is not already a part of, the powerful individuals and groups in the organization, either those who by virtue of their position have the power to reward or punish him, or those who themselves have significant contacts or influence networks – the committee secretary, the chairman's personal assistant (his wife?), the computer manager and so on.

The power that is exercised by these key actors is not always that coming from the potential of applying formal or informal sanctions. Often it is the power to 'write the agenda'. They may control and disseminate information in particular ways so as to reduce the likely perception of alternatives to what they regard as important and right. They may ensure that particular personnel selection policies are implemented. They may literally determine the agenda and order of business of meetings. Above all they may develop and reinforce procedures, rules, norms and language, resort to which then becomes the basis for rejecting certain proposals, accepting others and preventing some from ever being put forward.<sup>7</sup>

We have been painting a picture in which much of what goes on in organizations, including that which brings change, does so within a cultural framework

<sup>7</sup> See Lukes (1974) for an analysis of three dimensions of power including power which is exercised over people who do not even see alternatives to the current situation. Bachrach and Baratz (1970) is a classic text upon the power that is exercised through non-decision-making and the 'mobilization of bias'. Within the organizational context Pettigrew (1977) has also cogently described the 'management of meaning' as a crucial element in the organizational political process.

of rules, expectations and 'taken-for-granted' definitions of reality. Clearly, however, some individuals and groups can refuse to accept the rules, and if they can mobilize sufficient support, can change the nature of the game completely.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, to give the impression that we believe all individuals in all organizations are much of the time actively and energetically engaged in attempts to gain power of one kind or another would be a contradiction of our view of men as individuals, with their own frames of reference. Many people will view the organization simply as a means of providing them with a sufficient income to conduct what they regard as the most important parts of their lives outside the workplace.<sup>9</sup> Their politics extend no further than to ensure that they do not antagonize their boss, are doing a good enough job to ensure that they keep it, are promoted to a certain level according to their age. They are not interested in control over the direction and affairs of the organization.

Most of us move in several different social worlds and thus the pervasiveness of a particular world's definition of reality is usually, and fortunately, limited. Indeed, that we feel comfortable with the metaphor of organizational politics as a 'game', despite the fact that it is often deadly serious, is because so much of it involves rules and rituals that we know, in a meta-reflective way, are rules and rituals: "I know what I am doing and I know that you know that I know. . . ."

In any organization there are likely to be several different political 'games' between different groups of people and around different issues.<sup>10</sup> Some of these will overlap, as players are involved in several different games. Any individual interested in influencing particular events will need to decide which game (or games) is most important and appropriate for him to participate in. Being accepted as a credible player in an organizational political game, however, is a luxury (or curse) not open to everyone. A player in a management game may never be allowed into the internal political game on the shop floor, and vice versa. Even within what might be seen as their own 'circles' many do not occupy positions which give them entry to the appropriate networks of communication and power. Others still lack the personal skills of self-presentation, argument and negotiation that are, at least at a certain minimum level, necessary for being seen as a credible participant.

For those, however, who wish to have some control over what they are required to do in an organization, and over what certain others do, engaging in organizational politics is invariably essential. And while we, in the developed world, live in a society where social status, and often a personal sense of worth, is linked to the income and role titles which we derive from our occupation, then many

<sup>8</sup> See Mangham (1979) who argues strongly that it is possible to change the nature of the game.

<sup>9</sup> See Burns (1969).

<sup>10</sup> See the 'Governmental (bureaucratic) politics' paradigm in Allison (1971). In this book he lucidly illustrates how different 'conceptual spectacles' will lead you to look at and explain an organizational decision making process in different ways.



of us will attempt to become involved in the competitive game of organizational politics by which we obtain these valued outcomes.

That we are prepared to make so many assertions about the nature of organizational life is because we believe that they are well founded in our own experience and the experience of others. Theoretically too, whether seeking to influence the affairs of men according to his own conception of what is right or best, or to defend his own freedom of action within a fairly limited area of influence, or to obtain the material and social rewards of particular positions, the individual who engages in organizational politics does so because he is a human being with his own goals, objectives, personal frame of reference. It is this 'individualistic' model of man which allows us to make certain generalizations about the pervasive nature of organizational politics.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROBLEM-HELPING

The implications of the perspective on organizational life we have outlined here for thinking about problems and problem-helping methods will be explored in greater detail in the following chapters. Indeed the whole of this text is concerned with them in one way or another. However, we shall consider some of them briefly now.

To take this perspective seriously means that it is impossible to assume, self-evidently and non-problematically, that the way other people interpret a situation, is the same as, or even similar to, the way we interpret that 'same' situation. An event which you or I might see as a major crisis for a particular reason may be seen as a major crisis by someone else for completely different reasons, by another person as a minor difficulty, and yet other people may not even have noticed it at all. No situation is inherently, 'objectively' a problem. A problem belongs to a person; it is an often complicated, and always personal (albeit in some part shared with some others), construction that an individual places on events.

The construction which is a person's problem comes from a complicated mental framework of personal beliefs, attitudes, hypotheses, prejudices, expectations, objectives and values. Because people in organizations are involved in complicated social relationships, and frequently engage in internal political games of one kind or another, the way a person constructs a problem will also often include these aspects of their organizational life. Whether we disagree with, or regard as irrational, or illegitimate or stupid all these elements of a person's problem construction, they are his reality, and will be crucial to the choices he makes and actions he takes about his problems.

Thus, if one is attempting to find ways of helping people with their problems, statements such as "once we have found out what the real problem is we can solve it"; "yes, but as I see it the real problem is . . ."; "the problem with John is that he just does not understand the problem", hardly seem helpful. Yet they

are more common than uncommon. They are unhelpful even when such statements are no more than a reflection of organizational culture and norms rather than a genuine intellectual commitment. They simply reinforce the other equally unhelpful but common features of the relationship between the helper and his 'client' which has to do with the mutual expectations of each other's role: the helper is a person who has techniques to help with the 'objective', 'rational', legitimate aspects of a problem (even if they are relatively insignificant to the client) and it is not only inappropriate, pointless, but potentially politically dangerous, for the client to move outside them.

Thereby the helper does not find out what is really bothering his clients. They work together on a problem which either neither of them, or just the helper 'owns'. In these circumstances often neither of them feels satisfied with the outcome, as, for example, when a helper works, with the best of intentions and effort, on a problem he thought his client had only to find out afterwards that his recommendations have been quietly ignored and the client is acting in ways that make no sense with respect to the problem the helper heard about; while the client, while acknowledging that the helper has done his best, is confirmed in his belief that the helper can only provide assistance with particular, and limited, aspects of problems.

During the past five years we have been developing and using with many different clients methods which can facilitate effective help to those who do not have nice, neat, 'rational', 'objective', legitimate and easily quantifiable problems. We do not argue that by means of them a helper will surmount all the difficulties of the helper-client relationship, set as it is within a context of organizational politics and the need for self-protection rather than openness. We do argue, however, that they can go some way towards reducing them and that if no attempt is made to move beyond techniques for neat and tidy or quantifiable or legitimate problems, then there will continue to be an important and unfortunate gap in the repertoire of problem-helping methods. The rest of this book describes, and sets in context, these methods.

### *Case Study*

Ian Brown, the new marketing director of Leakey Products Ltd., was worried. He was anxious to get things moving, to make use of the ideas that he had had hanging around for a long time about the direction the company should be going; he was also keen not to let the grass grow under his feet because he felt that the easiest time to make most of the changes he wanted would be straight away. However, he was particularly concerned about Alan Dixon, the new product development manager. Alan, in Ian's opinion, was a highly competent and creative engineer, but Ian reckoned that the direction in which the competence and creativity were channelled might be the wrong one in the longer term. In fact

everybody else around the department knew that Ian felt no enthusiasm for Alan's quest for the perfect tap.

Leakey Products Ltd., is an old established company which started off from manufacturing brass ball valves. Over the years it has expanded both into industrial taps and stop cocks, and with a range of bathroom and kitchen fittings. It was bought out by House Holdings Ltd., six years ago, and since then has developed the lines for which Ian had been responsible before his recent promotion, which were up-market taps and shower fittings.

Although the company had expanded, Ian felt that the industrial products division had been expanding less rapidly than the others, and he was convinced that there was a need for new products that reflected the directions of technological change in the last few years. He felt that Alan, responsible for both consumer and industrial new-products development, had got out of touch with changes in market conditions in this area. Perhaps he was too interested in continuing technical improvements in taps, rather than in the new uses and control systems that had come in with the microchip. Alan, on the other hand, had already confided to John his feeling that "we are all going to be under the microscope now", which presumably meant that he felt that was where he was going to be. Alan was quite aware of Ian's attitude to his work, and felt it was unfair as he had been working long and hard to improve the performance of the company's products; for example his team had now produced a prototype valve for use with semi-fluids as well as having got most of Ian's product ideas off the ground. Some of Ian's ideas had been pretty impractical when Alan had taken them over. Alan had often had thoughts of moving to a new company where he could use his research and development talents more fully, but his wife and children are settled in the area and do not want to move. He is a professional engineer at heart – and proud of it.

So we see that Ian and Alan hold quite distinct perspectives on the 'new product' issue, each of these perspectives showing different political concerns. Meanwhile John and Peter, who occupy two of the three marketing manager posts (Ian's old job has yet to be filled), are not giving thought to the 'new product' issue – they have enough worries trying to meet their targets and prepare themselves for any attempts by Ian to change their budgets and staffing levels. The distinct perspective of John and Peter is that they do not feel they have any particular perspective or political concern about new products.

Within this context Ian decides that the best way of coping with Alan is to tell him to freeze all current product development projects and ask him to prepare a full analysis of the future both for existing products and for new product opportunities in the light of a detailed forecast of market opportunities. The marketing department does not have a resident mathematician/statistician and so Ian thinks it would be helpful to enlist the help of a Central Services consultant. The more he thought about it, the more enthusiastic Ian became about involving an outside consultant because he believed that having a scientist

work with Alan might help convince him of the 'misguidedness' of his current work, and encourage Alan to develop in a fruitful way for the long-term success of the marketing operation.

But what are the prospects for the consultant from Central Services in entering such a situation? How will someone from Head Office cope with such a mess of different needs and such a maze of potential clients? Will Alan co-operate with the internal consultant or will he keep giving her duff data? Can John and Peter show any interest at all? Is the consultant going to be constrained to a routine piece of statistical sales forecasting, or can she find a way (if she wishes to do so) of making sense of the distinct perspectives, ideas, and political concerns?



## 2

*Helping with Problems*

The last chapter ended with some statements about the implications of the nature of problems for the practice of helping people in organizations. This chapter will go in greater detail into the individual way that people see problems, and the consequences this has for those who wish to give or receive help over problems. Most helpers see themselves as being in business either to solve problems for their clients or to help their clients solve their own problems. But what are problems?<sup>1</sup>

We usually refer to ourselves as having a problem if things are not as we would like them to be, and we are not quite sure what to do about it. If this chapter is coming out in a way which we think will not be quite clear to a reader, and we want it to be clear to the reader, and we do not know how to go about making it clearer, we have a problem. If we know how to do it but just have not got round to it yet, we would not usually dignify our dilatoriness with the word 'problem'; similarly if we reckoned it was going to be difficult for us to get the chapter right, but quite possible if we put the effort in, then that too would not usually be described by us as 'a problem'. If we were perplexed about this chapter, and did not feel it was quite right, but did not know what to do about it, then that is the sort of thing that we describe as a problem.

One of the most frustrating things often about knowing that something is not quite as we would wish but not knowing what to do about it is that if someone asks us – or we ask ourselves – “What is the problem?”, we do not really know the answer to that question. If the person who asks us is our boss, a friend of our boss, someone who is competing with us for the next promotion, or someone who works for us and we are not quite sure what they think of us, then we might present one label. If it was someone we knew and trusted, we might present another label. In any case, how you answer the question “What is the problem?” depends on who you are talking to, if only because you expect different people to be able to understand different things. So if you are talking to someone with the intention of helping them with some problem, the description you get on the problem may vary a lot with how they see you.

We can usually give some sort of answer to the question “What is the problem?”, but it may not be an answer that convinces us, and we often feel we have only

been able to give a rather limited description. So it is quite common that the only descriptions we can find for problems are, without in any way being intended to be lies, not descriptions that we feel contain the most important truths about our problems.

Now this is a common feature of the experience of many people, that the step between feeling some sort of discomfort or dissatisfaction, feeling that there is some problem somewhere, and being able to say “The problem is such-and-such” is a very big step. In fact quite often we find that if we can say what the problem is we have gone a long way towards solving it. This seems to be true with any kind of problem, whether it be some technically oriented work problem, a relationship problem at home, or anything in between.

One of the properties of problems with which helpers have found it quite hard to grapple is the extent to which all problems are personal; different persons see different problems in what other people would take to be the same situation. This is an important point in our argument, and it is fairly well accepted in everyday ‘common sense’. This point does not seem to raise much disagreement when it is expressed theoretically, but it is often rather more difficult to bear it in mind and act upon it in practice. For this reason, we shall give three examples of what different people seeing different problems may look like.

Suppose that a student reported himself as feeling tired and listless, generally not very well, and that he did not feel he could be bothered to do anything. A students' union officer might conclude that the student's problem was depression, and might probe to find out more about the depression by asking the student how long it had been going on. The doctor at the University medical centre might say that the problem was a cold, that there were a lot of them about and that she had just had one herself. The student's academic tutor might think that the student was not absorbing himself sufficiently in his work, and that a bit more application and hard work would make still more application and hard work easier. The campus radical might think that the problem was classical anomie and alienation, brought on by the death throes of the capitalist system, and the student counsellor might start from the belief that the problem must lie with the student's sex life. Each of these people finds a different problem in the situation, at least in part because they are each inclined to attribute different causes to events.

For another example, think of a board of directors in a medium-sized manufacturing firm, confronted with a set of figures which show that they 'have a problem of' their market share declining. In this case, the people involved might agree this label for their problem, but might have quite different interpretations of that agreed problem label. The production director may think that the problem is a hopeless advertising campaign that the marketing department have bought, the marketing director may think that the problem is the inflexibility of the production department, which prevents them from being able to offer customers the delivery dates and special options that competitors can achieve. The finance

<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of this question, see Eden and Sims (1979) and Sims (1978, 1979).



director may think that the problem is excessive conservatism on the part of both the marketing and the production directors in continuing with rigid quality control even though it means that their product is a little more expensive than others on the market.

It is by no means always the case that people assume that problems stem from others rather than themselves. For example, on a magazine, it would be quite possible for an editor to think that they are losing readers because the features editor has become fascinated by some subject which bores most of their readers, while the advertisement controller may attribute loss of readers to a decrease in the number of advertising pages. Both people might believe that it is really their contribution that the magazine depends on, and so any serious problems must stem from their own function.

When we talk about problems, we are not necessarily thinking of problems in the negative sense — our definition was that a problem was a situation where someone wanted something to be different from how it was and was not quite sure how to go about making it so. Thus opportunities for building on strengths and making positive improvements, openings that you feel are there to be exploited but you cannot quite see how at the moment, are also counted as problems for our purpose. The same point about how different people see different problems still applies. The editor and the advertisement controller of a successful magazine may well see different problems in the sense of different opportunities for their magazine, where the editor may think that there is an opportunity to expand the editorial content by a few pages, and thus bring in large numbers of extra readers, ensuring the health, future and profitability of the magazine. The advertisement controller may at the same time see an opportunity to tie the editorial matter more closely to the advertising material, and increase the number of pages of prestige advertising, thus enabling them to increase the rate per page for advertising there, and so ensuring the health, future and profitability of the magazine!

So different people see different problems, and in this sense problems are made and not born. To some extent we believe we can generalize about the kinds of problems that people of different roles, personalities and cultures define for themselves. For example, there is a frequent generalization in the Health Service that, while physicians see everything (not just patients) as complicated and needing a lot of thought, surgeons see all problems as much more cut and dried (*sic*). Some personalities seem to find the running of a large business to be something which they just get on with and which they do not see as problematic, while others find it a very difficult problem to decide what to eat for lunch. In some cultures, possession of a certain kind of problem seems to be very important to people. For some people in British engineering companies, for example, to have no problem of stress and overworking suggests to them that they are slacking, or unimportant, or in some other way deficient. With some people it seems that if they are short of problems at work they manage

to devise themselves the most amazingly complicated problems to do with how they go on holiday.

All these differences in the kinds of problem that different people see do not necessarily imply that any of them are wrong, or that they are deceiving themselves, but rather that almost any situation that a person might be dissatisfied with can be seen as having multiple causes, and any one of those causes may be taken as the central point to hang a problem around. If a person is dissatisfied with the amount of money they have, they may say that the problem is too much taxation, or that their company pays them too little, or that their financial aspirations are too high, or any of a huge number of possible tags that could be used to describe the problem that they are experiencing. They may say all of these things, and mean them, which means that it is very important not to take the first verbal tag offered as being 'the problem', but only as an initial indicator that there may be a complicated interlocking mess of problems there to be investigated.<sup>2</sup>

When we are in a situation which is complex and worrying, we are usually too busy and too anxious and too involved with that situation to perceive such choices of what we might see the problem as being; they are often visible only from the outside. Because most of us have experienced this many times over the years, we have some experience of recognizing our own state of anxiety and asking some other person for the kind of help that we want. Often the most helpful thing that others do for us can be to make some suggestion, or put forward some idea, which enables us to change our problem. This is also, however, the most easily rejected form of help. If we do not 'own' the problem that the would-be helper is offering us, then we will not be interested in working on it; it is quite easy to reject the sort of help which starts from trying to tell us that our problem is not 'really' what we thought it was. Usually, if we ask someone for help with some situation that is worrying us, the relationship between us and that person is already quite close, so that we can predict and control the kind of help we get. The professional 'helper' in an organization, however, has often to work within a less-developed relationship with those who are being helped, who do not know the helper well enough to feel confident that they can defend themselves against his help.

#### THE HELPER AND PROBLEMS

Problems, then, are very individual things in the sense that different persons might see quite different problems in the same situation. The individual may find it helpful to remember that another person might construct a quite different

<sup>2</sup> The idea of problems being found in 'messes' comes from Ackoff (1974, p. 4), who describes a mess as a 'system of problems'. Kepner and Tregoe (1965, p. 63) use a different definition of mess, very similar to our definition of 'problem'.



problem, or even no problem at all, if they were in the same situation; this fact may be of some help in letting a person think more laterally about their problems.

The argument becomes much more significant, however, when we think about problems with which several persons are concerned, because in that case those persons might have quite different views of the problem, both because they have different ways of understanding what is going on around them, and also possibly because they have different interests, responsibilities, duties and relationships, which lead them to quite different concerns. In the cases that interest us, for helping with problems, there must always be at least two persons involved – the helper and the client. It is very rarely as few as that, however. It would not be untypical in an organization for a person to feel unease or disquiet about something, and for them then to need the agreement of their colleagues and their boss before they can talk to a helper about it. When they talk to their colleagues and boss, they will almost certainly have to answer questions from them about “What is the problem?” They will need to give them some answer to that question, which shows that the problem is of a type that they need help with, but which also does not suggest that they need help because they are incompetent (presuming they do not want to be thought incompetent), and also probably which suggests to them that it is in their interests too to have help with this problem; so the person might well choose to state their problem in a way that implies that a solution to it might also solve problems that they suspect some of their colleagues have. They will also almost invariably feel the need to talk about this problem in terms of not being satisfied over the things that are publicly regarded in their organization as legitimate values; this means that a lot of problems which might initially have had nothing to do with such concepts end up being talked about in the terms of the persons who have them in terms of profit, efficiency, ensuring future markets and so on. Even within a team of managers who get on reasonably well and trust each other, it would be unusual for a problem to be phrased in more personal and less legitimate terms such as promotion, making life easier for oneself, or gaining some advantage over another department in the organization.

Not only will the person who introduces the problem produce a carefully doctored version in this way, but also the other members of the team will want to have their say, and so produce further and possibly drastic changes, as the problem is discussed and negotiated within the team. Once again, the points they make are edited by them in line with years of hard-earned and successful experience in that organization, as to what sort of things they need to say in order to get what they want and maintain a favourable image with one another. The skills which all of us who work in organizations develop mean that, without anyone being in the least untruthful or deliberately deceitful, the discussion is almost bound to be quite some way removed from a frank and open discussion of what it is that is eating us.

Now the whole process of careful and selective presentation of the problem

happens once again. Whoever it is who has the right or the duty to talk to a helper about it and to become ‘the client’ presents that problem in a way that they hope is clear enough to enable the helper to do something helpful. At the same time, they describe the problem in a way which does not present themselves or their colleagues in too bad a light, and which they do not think will lead to the helper making recommendations that are against their interests as they see them. Depending on the structure and the division of responsibilities within the client organization, the person who presents the problem to a helper may or may not be the person who originally felt some discomfort or unease. In either case, the problem has undergone an enormous amount of restating and editing between the original feeling of discomfort by a person and the version that gets related to a helper. Similar changes, selection, forgetting of some parts and emphasis of other parts can be expected again where the helper is part of a team of helpers rather than a solitary individual. All this, it should be noted, presumes good will and no intention to mislead on the part of anybody. We are for the moment ignoring such situations as when a person presents a problem which they intend to lead to the downfall and removal of one of their colleagues, or where someone lays claim to a problem which they do not actually feel, but they think will impress their colleagues, or where a helper is brought in to talk about a problem in the hope that they will fail, so that the problem concerned can be shown to be of huge proportions and unassailable. A current favourite is to put a problem to a helper in such a way that you get a report back from him which can then be argued as a case for making people redundant; “we deeply regret this, but the study that has been carried out by independent consultants has shown that . . .”, and the helper, by being set a carefully selected problem, has produced a predictable answer which can then be used by the clients as a pseudo-objective justification for the action they were going to take anyhow.

For another example, two departments in an oil company both retained Operational Research consultants to look at the question of how much storage tankage should be built at a particular refinery. Both groups set out to produce profit-maximizing answers to the question. Each group was given the context of the issue by its employing department, and both groups came up with answers which were in the interests of their department; the two answers conflicted sharply. Even in this case, it seems unlikely that the persons concerned thought they were distorting anything. Much more likely is that they thought they were giving the ‘right’ description of the problem. So how does a helper begin to be helpful in such a complicated situation?

The first answer to this question that we have found useful is to find ways to help clients to talk as directly as they can about what it is that is concerning them. If the helper is labelled as an Operational Researcher, clients may feel that they should quantify as much as they can of what they say to him. Nothing wrong with that, of course, if they were already thinking of it all quantitatively, but quite often they may not have been doing so, the quantities they give may



be an afterthought; they do not feel very confident in the quantification, and therefore however good the rest of the helper-client interaction, they will not feel very confident in the outcome of whatever work the helper does. They know that it was all based on doubtful data in the first place. So it is important that the client should feel able to talk about things in non-quantitative ways.

Similarly, a lot of factors that are significant in many of the more important organizational decisions are not seen by the decision-maker as being definite points, but rather are feelings, or hunches, or theories. When talking to helpers they are quite likely to feel that they should not spend their time telling a 'management scientist' about feelings and theories, but should rather stick to the 'facts'. It is our experience that the things that are seen as objective, hard 'facts' around problems that are really concerning people are often fairly trivial compared with the subjective, soft 'feelings' or 'theories' that they see as central to it. This is scarcely surprising, because people who are dealing with complicated and large issues will have built up a body of experience and wisdom over time which probably incorporates more different things than they would know how to separate out or talk about; their 'feelings' are actually based on a huge number of 'facts', but because they cannot remember and describe those facts individually, they may not regard the resulting feeling as a worthy topic to talk about in front of a helper. Helpers who let such an inhibition persist will be deprived of most of their clients' important thinking about their situations.

Again, whether or not the helper likes the values, the personal goals and the organizational politics being pursued by the client, they do not go away or become less potent for the client by being ignored by the helper. Helpers who do not wish to blindfold themselves while serving the client will find that they can serve both themselves and the client better to the extent that these matters can be brought into the open between them. Helpers are likely to be more useful if they know what they are doing.

#### STYLES OF HELP

The second group of points that we would make about the sort of complexities that we have been describing in talking about problems between helper and client have to do with three different approaches to giving help.<sup>3</sup>

Firstly, we can recognize a 'coercive' approach. By this we mean that helpers may use some of their power to tell the client what problem they think the client ought to have and ought to be working on. If helpers present themselves as experts, and clients accept them as such, that means that the helpers will have some power to tell the clients what they ought to think.

Coercive strategies are very rarely completely open, but are more likely to take the form of name dropping, either about techniques or skills that the helper

has, or about powerfully placed persons in the organization with whom the helper claims to have links. Because a complicated view of a situation tends to be a bit cumbersome, it often happens that a simpler view can drive out a more complicated one, and this also enables helpers coercively to introduce their own definitions of a problem, simply because they do not know so much about what is going on. Few helpers would acknowledge that they coerce their clients into having particular problems, but an awful lot are prepared to admit that in particular cases they did use some fairly heavy forms of influence. Coercion is not necessarily a one-way process, either. A client who is exceedingly deferential, exhibits great confusion, and begs the helper for their 'objective' view, is going a long way towards coercing the helper into taking a coercive stance.

Secondly, we can recognize an empathetic approach. In this approach, the helper attempts to understand fully the client's problem, and to stay within the client's way of understanding things and taking action. Many schools of consultancy advise their adherents to 'start from where the client is', or that the consultant should only work on the problem that the client sees. In this case, the helper attempts to reflect back to the client what they are saying, and is careful not to make suggestions—because such suggestions would belong not to the client but to the helper. This approach has a drawback in that, ultimately, no person can fully understand another person's problem without becoming that person; and if they could become that person, not only would they understand that problem, but they would have it.

A third approach to giving help is what we call a 'negotiative' approach, by which we mean that, instead of taking either the helper's definition of the problem and working on that, as in the coercive approach, or being confined to the client's definition of the problem, as in the empathetic approach, the helper should reckon on having a period of negotiation with the client. This will start from empathetic listening by the helper to what the client has to say about a problem. They then proceed to negotiate a problem which both can become interested in and committed to, the solution of which will fulfil needs for both of them, even though it is unlikely to be either strictly the felt problem of the client, or a problem which the helper comes in thinking would be a good one to look at. By aiming to operate within this paradigm, helpers are acknowledging that what they do with their clients in arriving at a problem is similar to what their clients do among themselves in their teams in arriving at a description of the problem they are prepared to give to a helper. To the extent that helpers acknowledge that this is what is going on, they and their clients can be more aware and deliberate in what they do.

This avoids some of the drawbacks of the coercive approach, where it is quite easy for a helper to produce and possibly even to implement elegant solutions to problems that nobody had anyhow, or for a helper to feel that they have something to say, and then to find that the client does not seem to listen to them

<sup>3</sup> For more detailed discussion of these approaches to giving help, see Eden and Sims (1979).



(any more than they listened to the client). It also avoids some of the drawbacks of the empathetic approach, which demands a superhuman achievement from the helper in listening to and understanding the felt problems of their clients. We say superhuman because the helper is a different person with different values, needs and interests, and is therefore very unlikely to be able to feel precisely the problem that the client feels when inhabiting a situation. Life is too short for the client to tell the helper all the ramifications of their problem, and why and how they feel it as a problem, and what its context is. In the negotiative approach it is still very important for helpers to start by listening to and empathizing with their clients, so that they can understand the meaning of what the client tells them, and because this is likely to set the tone for more understanding in both directions. What happens from then on, however, is not the same as in the empathetic approach.

In this chapter we have outlined a number of overall directions that we think make for effective helping with problems. The recommendations, however, remain as empty theorizing without a technique to help a person become both more capable of addressing problems in the form in which they matter to their clients, that is, with not many constraints on problem formulation, and also capable of managing explicitly a negotiative approach for finding the problems to help with. We shall go on in Chapters 3 and 4 to look at techniques which make these ideas easier to operate. Before that, however, we should say a little bit about help that is and is not helpful.

#### ENABLING AND DISABLING HELP

Some of the United Nations organizations taught their members to be wary about assuming the role of helper with the fable of the monkey in the flood, which goes roughly like this.

A monkey was sitting in his favourite tree in the forest during a sudden flood. Seeing a lot of his fellow creatures being swept away in the flood, and being a helpful monkey, he kept reaching out his long arm into the flood waters and rescuing passing creatures, which he pulled out and put in a large flat part in a fork in the boughs of the tree. The little brown things with four legs and with or without fur were mostly grateful to the monkey, but the oblong silver things with big mouths seemed upset. In fact the silver things all died, but the monkey assumed that this was because they had been in the water too long, and his help had come too late. He did not understand why it was that the fish were not grateful for his technical 'assistance'.

It often does not feel much more helpful than this if someone comes to your aid when things are getting difficult in a meeting. However helpful the intentions of the would-be helper, it is very difficult for the helped not to find themselves defined in the eyes of everybody else around as incompetent by the very fact that someone helped them and therefore they obviously needed help. Try help-

ing some stutterers to finish their sentence, or some children to finish their jigsaw puzzle if the idea that help is not always seen as helpful needs any more demonstration. Most people who have ever had a helpful boss agree that there were things that they just never learned to do for themselves, so long as help was available from that boss. Intendedly helpful feedback about how we are performing in our work may be anything from celestial to abysmal according to who gives it to whom, with what intent, and according to the care with which the helpers identify and restrict themselves to the help that the helped can cope with. Some people sometimes feel that they have got problems enough of their own without having to cope and negotiate with someone helping them with them as well (negotiative approach). It may also be unhelpful to have a deeply concerned helper becoming thoroughly involved in your problems (empathetic approach), or to have a clear-thinking expert doing incomprehensible calculations and manipulations on their simplified version of your problems (coercive approach).

We have argued that in some cases problems can be quite private possessions, quite personal things, and it has been said that in some cases to solve a person's problems may be nothing short of robbery.<sup>4</sup> What may be a problem to one person may be a part of their identity in their working world to another.

It seems to us that any approach to helping has the potential to disable as well as to enable. A particularly common cause of disabling help is inadequate listening by the helper to the client. The half-attentive listening of most social interaction is because much of the listener's attention is taken up with planning their next sentence or considering what impression they are making. Such listening may well keep the relationship between helper and client sweet, but is most unlikely to lead to enabling help. Attentive listening needs to be positively practised, and we shall be offering techniques in the next chapter that help with this.

We have said that client expectations may coerce a helper into a coercive approach. If this permits the client to become dependent on the helper, this could be disabling if the helper is not prepared to support the client's dependency. Such dependency is too important, and too potentially damaging, to be safely slipped into unawares, and is worth considering explicitly as part of the problem by the parties. Sigmund Freud suggested that it might be helpful to offer clients (or in his case, patients) solutions to their problems; if they disagree with these solutions, that disagreement might help to clarify their thoughts. This is a justification for what many helpers do anyhow. We would be very reluctant to use such an approach, except with clients who knew us very well, because of the possibility of creeping dependency. Otherwise, the client may feel that the only options are either to accept the solution, or to reject both the solution and the helper who offered it.

<sup>4</sup> This point is well made by Cook (1976, p. 8).



Jenny Horse had been an internal consultant at Head Office for the last couple of years, before which she had been in a similar position in a chemical company. She had visited some of the operating companies of House Holdings Ltd. quite a few times, but had only been to Leakey Products once, so she was quite pleased when her boss said to her one morning: "Ian Brown, the marketing director of Leakey, has asked us whether we can do a sales forecast for him. The situation seems to be that he wants a model of what's going on in the market and they don't have anyone who can do that sort of thing." "It's probably fairly routine stuff but try to stay with it; Ian Brown is a bit of a high-flyer and there might be more work in the future. He's probably worth knowing as a political ally."

Under grey skies Jenny drove to meet Ian. On the way she pondered on what she knew of the project – the marketing managers usually do the sales forecasts, what were they going to think about her repeating the exercise, albeit with the help of statistical packages? Last time she was at Leakey they hadn't seemed too keen on Head Office involvement (but that had been a project instigated by Head Office).

Ian turned up half an hour late apologizing profusely – it seemed the typical start to a project!

After the usual palaver he launched into an explanation of why he wanted her involved. "We need an outsider's view. I think we're not really up to date with how the market's working. Although my marketing managers do annual forecasts for budgeting and targeting purposes we now need a more sophisticated analysis of our markets. I gather your group have done some good market modelling. What I want is something to help us consider new product development strategies."

Ian went on to give her some of the background to the company's products and tell her who his senior managers were. "I would like you to involve Alan, the new-products development manager, in your work. I realize you will need to liaise with the marketing managers but can you let Alan know what you're doing. I hope that he can learn about your approach and get a feel for the data and its implications."

At this point we note that the issue Ian is presenting is beginning to change its form. The issue has been edited so that it looks legitimate as something to talk to Jenny about, although Ian has obliquely indicated that he is dissatisfied with the way new-products development is done. Ian has role expectations of Jenny and presents those aspects of his issue that meet those expectations.

Jenny left Leakey feeling that she could handle the job but registering a need to spend longer with Ian to get a better idea of what sort of report he wanted. She and her boss cobbled together some project terms of reference that would enable the project to get started. Four weeks had been allowed for getting an initial model design for Ian to see. Jenny's boss was very keen on leaving terms of reference open enough for the nature of the project to change if necessary so

that his staff could help the client as needed. Thus quite reasonably he was allowing them to define and redefine the issue as they learned about it. Sometimes this made for problems in establishing a budget for the project, but this was usually managed by laying down clear review dates. Ian was happy with this arrangement and wanted Jenny to start as soon as possible.

At the back of Jenny's mind was a nagging doubt that there was something too neat about the problem that Ian had been telling her about. He had told her what he wanted to know about, who the staff involved were, and it had all sounded like a nice, clean, sanitary sort of place in which to do a careful piece of modelling. But where was that smell coming from? The things that Ian had said about wanting Alan involved – what did they amount to? It had sounded all right at the time, and Jenny had not wanted to annoy Ian by going into minute detail about everything he said; after all, he was very much her senior, and she knew that her boss was keen that they should do more work with Leakey. In the past most of the consultancy work in Leakey had been done by the systems group from the accounts department at Head Office – in Jenny's eyes, a group that tended to go round telling their clients what problems to have, which she didn't think led to a particularly helpful and productive client – consultant relationship.

So Jenny had held off challenging too much why Ian wanted Alan involved, and, for all she knew, maybe the work for the new-products manager was connected with the marketing managers in a way that would make sense of such an involvement. By now she was kicking herself for not having gone a bit further on this during her initial meeting. She felt that she could probably have done more to encourage Ian to talk rather more to her and rather less to his stereotype of a model builder from Head Office. What was he up to? She had once been sent down to Rubber Washers Division to build a model, which everybody there had been very helpful about, and which had then been used by the management as a justification for closing the Division and buying in washers instead; ever since then Jenny had been reluctant to work without having some fairly clear idea about what her clients were trying to get out of what she was doing.

Not that she thought Ian was necessarily pulling a fast one. It was equally likely that he had not felt able to tell her all that much at a first meeting, and had had to make it all sound fairly respectable for the consultant from Head Office. But she knew that if it continued being that respectable, she would probably not end up being all that helpful. For all she knew, it might well not have been Ian who felt concerned in the first place.

The following day it seemed a lot clearer to Jenny. She would ring Alan and fix a time to go and see him, because she felt she needed to learn a bit about how Alan felt about the issue before she went any further. Would he, for example, feel threatened by her coming in as an outsider, when it was so unclear about how what she was doing related to his field? Afterwards, if possible, she would go and have a chat with one of the marketing managers; it would make less of a thing of her visit to Alan if she were seeing one of the others too, and the last