A Practical Theory to Help You Create a Brilliant Organization

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ABSTRACT

A case study is used to compare and contrast two organizational paradigms, the traditional/hierarchical or 'pyramidal' paradigm with the participative/democratic or 'parabolic' paradigm. The term parabolic is introduced to highlight the too often overlooked role of structure in shaping behavior. Organizational structures unconsciously shape our behavior in nearly all of our interactions because they reinforce clusters of values. The pyramidal paradigm subtly encourages behaviors based on status and control. The parabolic paradigm encourages behaviors based on relationship, learning and purpose. The parabolic paradigm integrates two approaches - collaborative and structural. When leaders or change agents integrate the collaborative approach (I don't, you could, together better) with the structural (pyramids dominate, parabolas partner, structure matters) they develop a theory of practice that enables them to act more purposefully, intelligently and more courageously. When they repeat their actions within their organizations they help their colleagues shift their mind-sets about how they too can contribute to their organization and ultimately the world.

I.   INTRODUCTION (AND ABOUT THE TITLE)

'A practical theory to help you create a brilliant organization.' This title may seem a little over the top when you first read it. The title could equally have been: 'A tentative theory for social change, (based on sound psychological principles and supported by some shards of evidence) that a number of intelligent people have found useful to help their colleagues develop and their organizations prosper.' Please accept my apologies if you feel you have been misled. But you can appreciate the problem. In a world oriented towards the dialectic, titles matter. If you favor the given title you are more likely to act. If you favor the second version you are more likely to take a wait and see approach. This could rapidly become a classic doer versus thinker debate unless we can agree that both versions may be equally and importantly true.

In the paper I will go into some of the psychological principles and provide some of the shards of evidence but before I do that I want to share some truths with you. These truths epitomize one of the essential components of this practical theory.

> First, I don't have the solution. Second, you could have the solution. Third, together we can work out a better solution.

When change agents adopt this collaborative approach they can think and act to maximize the expression and use of everyone's intelligence and creativity.

The other essential component of this theory involves an understanding of the part organizational structure plays in shaping people's behavior. Once we understand the link between structure and values - in particular the hierarchical (pyramidal) structure and its associated values of status and control we can ask whether some other structure(s) could support more collaborative values, eg, relationship and learning. If you take this perspective (like Galileo who, equipped with a Copernican perspective, went looking for a moon orbiting Jupiter because he reasoned that if the earth with its moon orbited the sun then perhaps there

were other planets orbiting the sun that had moons too) you discover some unusual structures that do indeed act in this way. These structures take different forms eg. sociocratic Buck (2007) self organizing teams Emery (1975) chaordic Hock (1999) and include a group of special structures that, for reasons that will become clearer in the paper, I will call 'parabolic'. This second component can also be summed up in three lines;

- Pyramids dominate,

- Parabolas partner,

- Structure matters.

It is the marriage of these two components that makes this theory powerful. When leaders or change agents integrate the collaborative approach (I don't, you could, together better) with the structural (pyramids dominate, parabolas partner, structure matters) they develop a theory of practice that enables them to act more purposefully, intelligently and more courageously. And when they repeat their actions they help their colleagues shift their mindsets about how they can contribute to their organization and ultimately the world.

II. OVERVIEW OF THE PAPER.

The paper is divided into three parts.

The first part is based on a case study involving two middle managers who have taken different approaches to a common problem. Although the case study is fictional, the actions and behaviors of the protagonists were based on observations and consultations with the author. The narrative has been interrupted at different points to illustrate and elaborate on key aspects of the theory.

The second part restates the main propositions and cites the evidence that links structure to behavior.

The third part invites the reader to take a global perspective. The paper ends with quotes from three senior managers from different industries who have experienced this work and have given permission for their comments to be used.

III. PART ONE - EASE STUDY – UOW STRUCTURE FACILITATES HIGHLY COLLABORATIVE BEHAVIOR.

'We shape our tools and then our tools shape us.'

Marshall McLuhan

One of the most difficult tasks any manager has to face is to ask good people to leave their organization. Many managers geared up to deal with this task, especially in the early months of 2009 when the economic outlook looked bleaker. This case study will compare and contrast the approaches taken by Alexandra and Caitlin, two middle managers who worked in the same commercial real estate firm, Triple A Commercial Reality Organization (TACRO). The case study will show how Caitlin, (a parabolic leader within a pyramidal organization) used her understanding of structure to help her team make the most of the challenge.

Commercial real estate had been one of the hardest hit industries by the recession and the board of TACRO was concerned about its survival. Early in May 2009 the executive decided to cut the sales force by 25% across the company. The decision was communicated down through the organization to Alexandra and Caitlin, regional sales managers for eastern and western metropolitan Melbourne respectively. The two managers were informed of the executive's decision by Michael, their Sydney based manager, on Wednesday evening over dinner at an expensive restaurant. The retrenched staff needed to be shown the door before the end of the following week, ie in 12 days' time. They would be given industry standard packages plus 10%. The details of who would stay and who would go and the process by which the choice

would be made would be left up to Alexandra and Caitlin. All agreed that the decision would be kept secret until the following Monday.
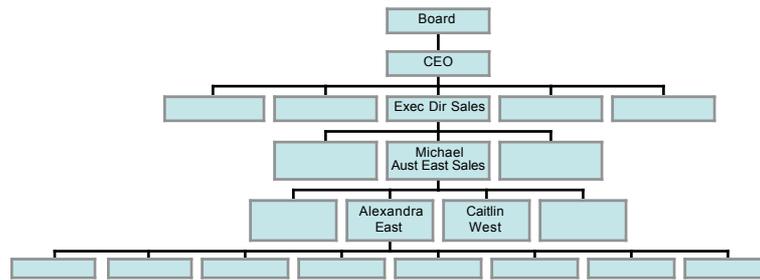

Figure 1.   Alexandra has internalised the formal TACRO organizational chart.

Alexandra went home that evening with a heavy heart. After kissing the sleeping children she sat down with her partner to talk about the day. Their conversation was interrupted at 10.00pm by a phone call from an apologetic but anxious Julian, one of her sales staff. He had heard a rumour that Sydney was going to axe 50% and that Michael had come to Melbourne to hold secret talks with Alexandra and Caitlin earlier that evening.

> 'What was the figure for Melbourne? . . . What do I have to do to keep my job?' asked Julian.

> As Julian was talking, Alexandra was thinking. 'Plan A lasted just over two hours. . . . . Julian certainly had his finger on the pulse.' She decided honesty was the best policy.

> Yes she had met with Michael and they had discussed redundancies but the figure was 25% not 50%. And the decision about who goes and who stays would depend on a number of criteria. She did not feel it appropriate to discuss it right now.

> 'Who else have you discussed this with?' asked Alexandra.

> 'Edwina,' said Julian.

> 'Would you both please keep this conversation quiet?' asked Alexandra.

Comment: Alexandra's decision to be honest seems admirable. But the decision has been unconsciously "shaped" by the organization's pyramidal structure. The pyramidal structure encourages linear relationships (ie relationships between Alexandra and each individual member). By asking Julian (and his colleague) to keep this conversation quiet she has created a secret sub group. Although an advocate of the theory of collaboration she does not understand it deeply enough to realise that she has just undermined it.
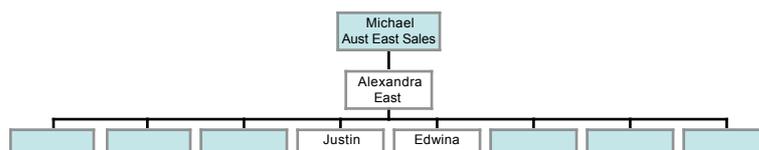
Figure 2.   Alexandra has unwittingly created a mini subgroup that has "secret information"

The story continues: Now let's contrast Alexandra's thinking and behavior with Caitlin's.

Caitlin also left the dinner with Michael and Alexandra with a heavy heart. But as she was driving home she began to see this problem in a new light. The situation presented an opportunity to implement a new parabolic structure with her team (see below). She had spent several months learning about how this new structure could support her collaborative skills and had hoped to implement the concept in the new financial year. 'I will act as if the model was in place today,' she thought.
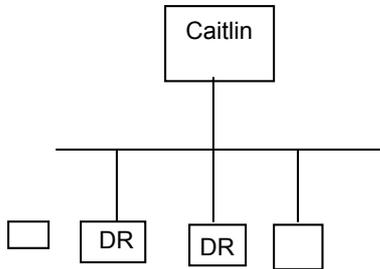
Figure 3A Pyramidal structure   Figure 3B Parabolic structure
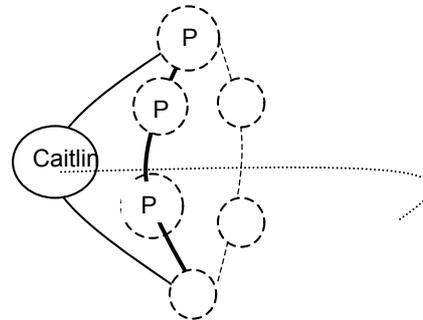
Refer to Figure 3A and 3B. Caitlin aims to transform her structural model from a traditional pyramidal structure where she is the manager with direct reports (DR) below her to a parabolic structure. (Imagine an umbrella lying on its side with Caitlin at the apex and the members of her team occupying positions on the struts. Note the parabolic structure is three dimensional. The metaphor of the umbrella is useful here. The relationship between the tips of the umbrella's spokes are very important and if the fabric tears the umbrella falls apart. For a leader to use the parabolic structure her task is to ensure that the relationships between the team members (ie between the Ps) are robust and that the people on her team become mutually accountable for the team's outcomes. This gives a vital clue about the structural differences. The parabolic leader has to encourage emotional and intellectual maturity in their team. The same cannot be said for pyramidal leaders / structures. These structures promote immaturity Argyris (1957).

Figure 4 A shows a stylised traditional pyramidal structure
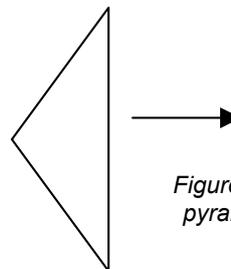
Figure 4 B shows the stylised pyramid being flipped on its side.

Refer to figure 4A and 4B. Caitlin has flipped the traditional pyramid on its side. The traditional hierarchical orientation now has a horizontal orientation.
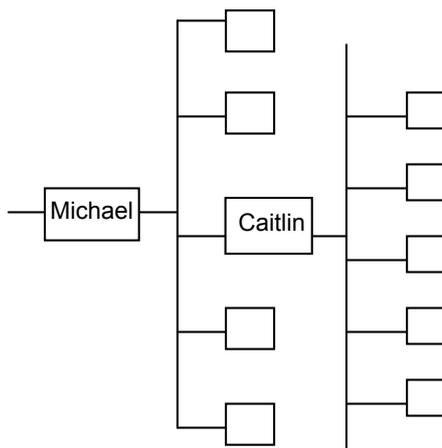
Figure 5A shows the traditional chart turned mental model on its side.
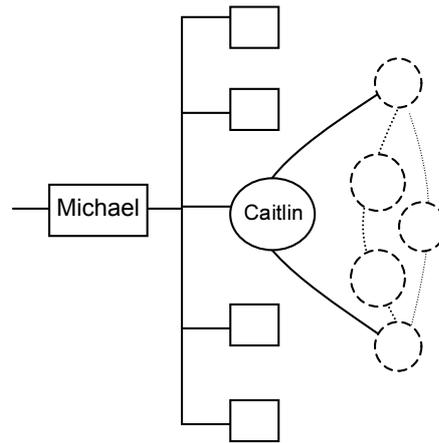
Figure 5B shows Caitlin's new of a parabolic structure

The story continues: On Thursday morning Caitlin arrived at the TACRO office just before 8.00am. She was surprised to see William also at his desk. William seemed focussed on a spreadsheet.

Ten minutes later William came over to Caitlin's desk.

'Can I talk with you?' William asked.

William had heard some rumours that Caitlin had met with Michael and Alexandra and that 50% of the sales staff would be axed. Could Caitlin tell him what was going on? Caitlin took a deep breath.

'Last night I met with Michael and Alexandra to discuss the business. At the moment I am not in a position to talk with you about what was discussed other than to say that that rumour is grossly distorted. What I can say is that when I am in a position to talk I will ensure that you and every other member of the team will have an opportunity to shape the next step in a fair and transparent way,' said Caitlin.

'We've just bought a new house and another baby is on the way. I'm really worried,' said William.

'I understand . . . . I understand your circumstances and I appreciate you coming to me. I have to think not only of you but everyone else in the team so that overall we get the best result. Some people will have heard rumours and some other people will have been out of the loop. I need to call an urgent meeting to bring everyone up to speed, talk about the future and address the rumours. This is an emotional period for all of us. . . . Georgina (Caitlin and Alexandra's PA) is away at the moment and I need some help. In view of the circumstances, could you give me a hand?'

Caitlin asked William to book a meeting room for the afternoon and to check that everything worked properly. She was going to make some phone calls to Alexandra and Michael about the rumours and prepare an email that she would send to the team. She wanted to word it carefully and it would take some time. If he was still in the office would he look over the email for any errors or comments?

Comment: Caitlin's actions are now being guided by the new parabolic structure. Caitlin is conscious of her relationships with William as a member of a team and with Alexandra and Michael as her colleague

and boss. At this stage William is likely to feel calmer as a result of being included in the process. Although it would be inappropriate to share her hopes for a new structure with her team - they will be too emotional to understand - Caitlin can act as if it were in place. For reasons that will become clear soon it will be necessary to talk about the structure with her boss and with HR.

The story continues: Alexandra was working out the criteria for how to select her new team when Caitlin phoned. They discussed their experiences and agreed that they needed to convene meetings with their teams that day. Caitlin suggested they put in a joint call to Michael apprise him of the new plan.

After the phone call Alexandra chose the criteria and then created a matrix. She gave each of her salespeople a rating of 1 to 5 according to:

- Performance – monthly sales figures for the last 12 months

- Ability to generate leads

- Ability to form good relationship with existing clients

- Willingness to share knowledge and help other members of the team

- Knowledge of the company and of the industry

When she had completed the rating it became clear that two people - an old timer and a new recruit would have to go. Alexandra then planned the meeting. She would begin by talking about the meeting with Michael and Caitlin. It was not 50% as rumours had suggested but 25%. She, Alexandra was going to have to make the most difficult decision she had ever made in her life. She had worked with everyone and had invited them all to be members of her team. It was not a decision she looked forward to.

- She wanted to allow people some time to vent their frustrations.

- She would introduce the criteria. Was there something missing?

- She would inform them of her decision and let people know on Friday (the next day).

Comment: Again Alexandra is being unconsciously guided by the pyramidal structure. Although her behavior seems thoughtful and sensitive she is demonstrating her status and control. Her behavior belies her espoused wish for a highly collaborative team. She chose the criteria, she did the rating and she will make the decision.
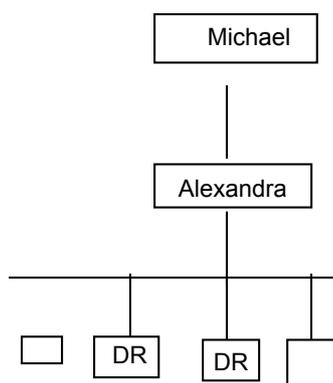
Figure 6A Alexandra's pyramidal structure
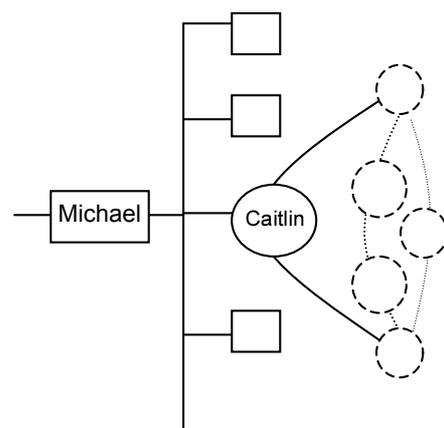
*Figure 6B Caitlin's parabolic structure*

Figure 6A and 6B allows us to make a direct contrast in the mental models. Both mental models take account of a bigger organizational system. In the pyramidal model Alexandra's behavior is affected not only by what she wants to do but by what she thinks Michael expects her to do in a hierarchical

organization. 'Michael expects me to make the decision. That's what I am paid to do. That's why I am the sales manager.'

In the parabolic model Caitlin is less constrained by what she thinks others expect of her. She has a different concept of leadership epitomised by the "I don't, you could, better together" approach. This approach translates into, 'My role in this structure is to make the best use of people's intelligence and creativity. I will keep Michael informed and I will work with my people so that together we will make the best decision. Though difficult it is the critical period that provides the greatest opportunity to highlight the values you want to guide your work. Let's introduce the change now.'

The story continues: Caitlin's carefully worded email was followed-up by a phone call to each team member during which she reiterated the main points. It was important but not essential that all of her team participate in the meeting that day. If for any reason they couldn't make it every effort will be made to consider their interests (one of the team members' father was gravely ill). The meeting would discuss the problem TACRO faced. It would explore a number of ways of dealing with the 25% cut. And no decision would be made about who would go at that meeting.

Caitlin planned to begin the meeting by talking about what she wanted as an outcome.

Outcome: That at the end of today's meeting we have discussed TACRO's problem and the steps we need to take to get the best outcome for everyone including the organization.

As she continued her preparation she thought of a number of possibilities including the likelihood that there were many other solutions she hadn't thought of. She wanted people to know that all of their relationships mattered – inside and outside TACRO. That it was important to find a way for those who would be retrenched to leave with as much pride as possible. She needed their help. How could her team make the difficult decision to lose 25%? What would be the basis for their decision? Who should make this decision? When should it be made? And then she added – irrespective of what we come up with I will give 50% of whatever bonus I get over the next two years to those declared redundant. She wanted to paint TACRO's problem as only a stage in its development. That it would recover and be looking to grow again. She hoped that those who left would consider coming back again.

Comment: Caitlin's behavior is being shaped by the values of relationship and learning. She has imagined herself at the apex of an umbrella that currently has eight struts. It will shortly have six struts but in two years (if all things work out well) it may have more struts. She has chosen to make the maximum use of her team's intelligence and creativity and is forging the team's character from the furnace of change.

From the foregoing I invite you to stand in Michael's shoes two months after he flew to Melbourne to deliver TACRO's retrenchment decision. If he were to check how his people were faring which team, Alexandra's or Caitlan's would be likely to be performing at a higher level? What would he notice?

We will leave Alexandra and Caitlin and their respective teams and acknowledge that Caitlin will need to deal with a host of new dilemmas as she helps her team make the mental transition to a parabolic structure.

Figure 7 shows the hybridization of TACRO – Michael has now adopted the parabolic structure
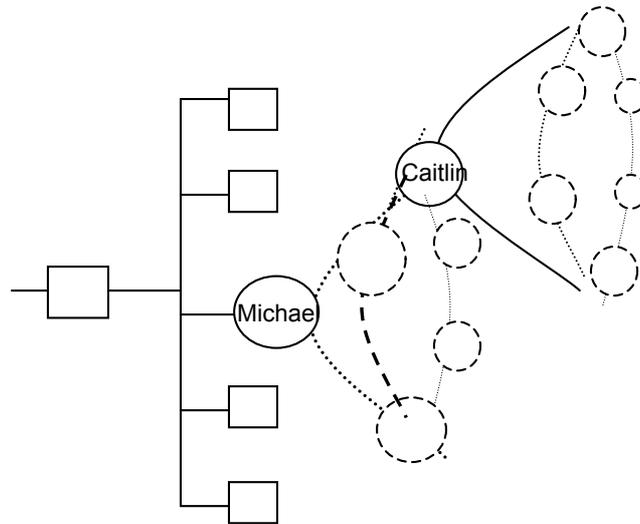
Sidebox - what if TACRO adopted the parabolic structure more fully?

TACRO as a Parabolic Organization in a transitional stage
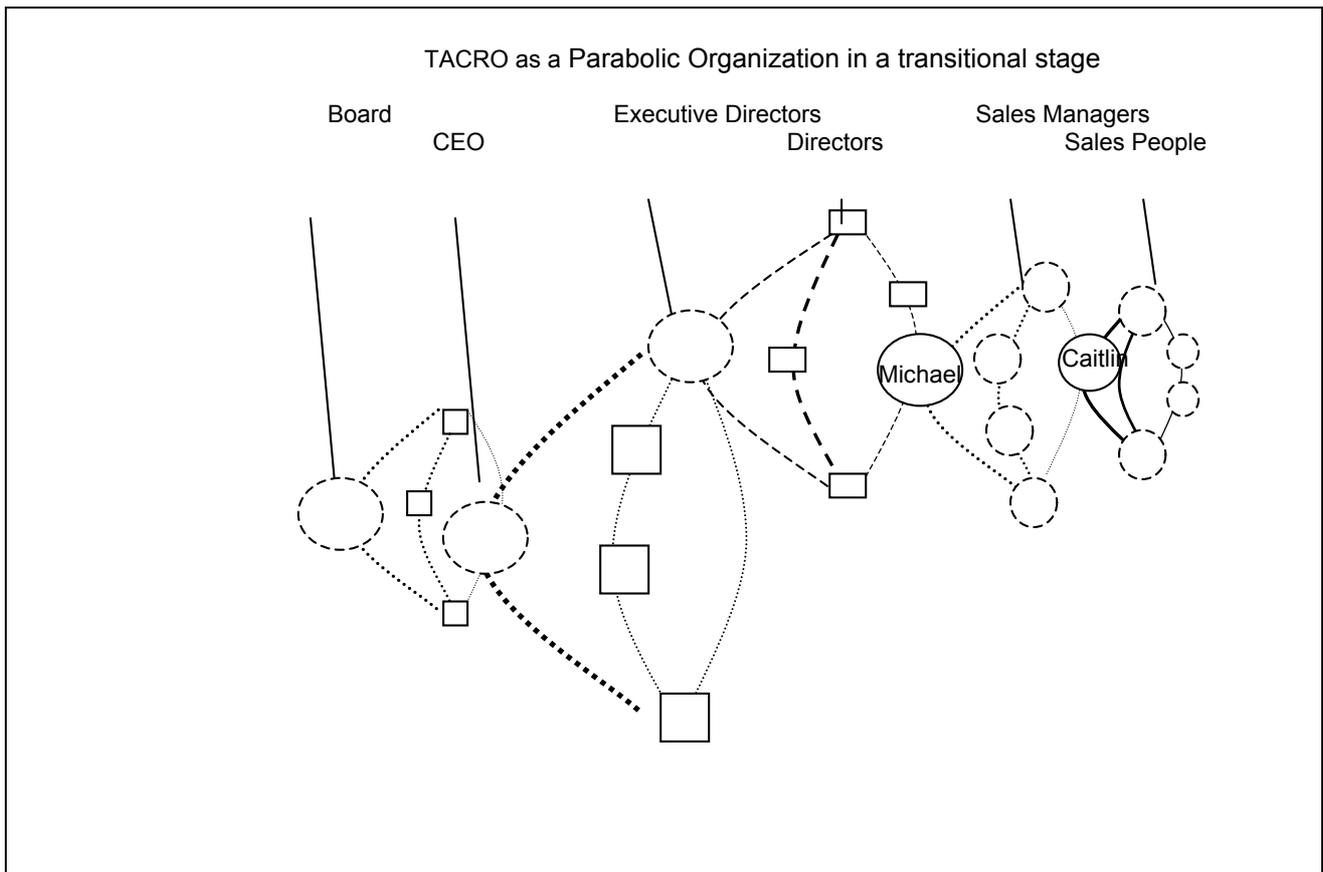
Figure 8 shows TACRO as a true parabolic organization. Over time the number of umbrellas is likely to diminish as the capabilities of everyone increase. In addition snap shots of the organization taken at different times will show minor differences as the organization responds to emerging needs see figure 9.
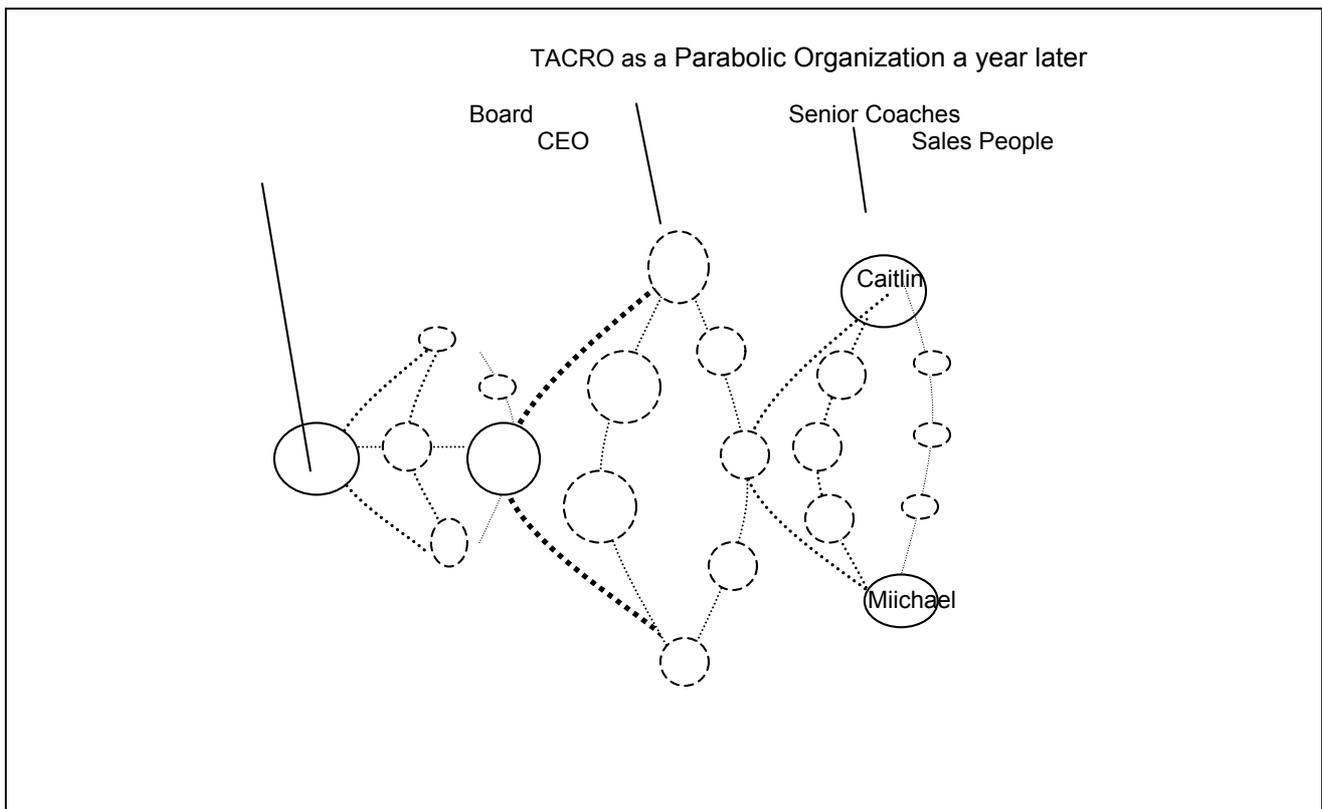
Figure 9 TACRO is a much more productive organization

I have added figures 8 and 9 to show some different forms of the parabolic structure as applied to TACRO. Whilst it is possible for Caitlin to influence Michael to investigate and perhaps then adopt structural change, see figure 7, total organizational change, see figure 8, needs active interventions from the most senior stakeholders eg Board and CEO. For structural change to succeed all of the leaders need to adopt and support highly collaborative behaviors. This needs to occur before the structural changes are made.

IV.   PART TWO – OOLLABORATION - YES BUT WHAT ABOUT STRUCTURE?

There are a large number of research studies that show that Caitlin's behavior is likely to have a significant positive effect on her people's productivity and their lives. She is displaying highly collaborative behavior and the impact of a highly collaborative leader on their team has been well documented. See Weisbord (1991), Katzenback (1993), Rehm (1999), Hull (2003), George (2004).

But here is an important question. How much change was as a result of collaborative leadership and how much was as a result of a change in Caitlin's mental model of her organizational structure? It is easy to dismiss the part played by structure. There appear to be three main reasons for this:

- First, most of us live and work in a paradigm that is constantly emphasising the primacy of the individual. Take a walk through the biography and management sections of a library or book store. The number of books focusing on the individual is huge in comparison to the number of books that look at teams, culture or structure. It is easy to read the above without registering the significance. Let me use a metaphor to illustrate. There is a tsunami of biographies that are oriented to the heroic, 'I did it my way' or 'it wasn't my fault' theme in the policital, business and general sections. A torrent of titles produced each year on how to be a better leader eg. *The Leadership Engine, Level 5 Leadership, The Authentic Leader, The 360 Leader, Leadership and the New Science, etc.* A flood of books promoting skill development for the individual, communication, change management, influencing, negotiation, conflict resolution, decision making, thinking, time management, strategy development and so

on. But only a river of books on teams, a stream of books on culture, a trickle on human systems and organizational design but only a mist of books on structure.

- Second, most of us have a blind spot when it comes to the societal dysfunction made possible by the pyramidal structure. The pyramidal structure has played a key role in enabling devious leaders and leadership groups to commit infamy. This is a complex area and needs further elaboration than space permits but in essence the pyramid makes it easy for people to leave their socially responsible, ethical selves at the door when any organization rewards position ahead of public interest. Let me use an example from the holocaust. Over sixty years ago Gustav Gilbert wrote 'Nuremberg Diary' about his experience as an army psychologist at the Nuremberg prison Gilbert (1995). Most senior Nazis were 'normal' intelligent people who contributed to an organization that did extraordinarily evil things. Gilbert revealed how this alignment occurred in a conversation with Walthur Funk, who became President of the Reichsbank from 1939 -1945. Funk told Gilbert that his wife was appalled by the anti-semitism and the violence that erupted during the Kristallnacht in 1938. She pleaded with him to resign from the government. He knew she was right . . . but if he resigned they would lose everything. They would be forced to move from their luxurious apartment to go and live in a three room flat. . . . Why not delay resigning for a bit? He was a non-violent and proud man and surely the Kristallnacht was an aberration . . . The Jews would receive compensation. . . . Although he denied knowing anything about it, within five years his bank would be accepting deposits of dental gold from the concentration camps. Until the end of the war in Europe Funk and his wife enjoyed the fruits of being at the top of one of Hitler's enabling pyramids. Pyramidal structures allow senior people to avoid taking responsibility. As one lawyer who has represented company executives charged with malfeasance for their part in the recent Global Financial Crisis put it, 'We'll all sing the stupidity song, We'll all sing the, These guys never told me song.'

- Third, until relatively recently, that is the last fifty years, compared to six thousand years of the pyramidal structure's existence (Taylor, 2005), we haven't had viable alternatives. Attempts have been made to invert the pyramid to promote the status of the frontline staff. There has been some limited enthusiasm for social systems theory and self managed teams Rehm (1999) a limited response to the sociocratic model Buck (2007) and a blip of interest in Hock's chaordic model Hock (1999) but in most cases the changes have not been embraced. These models are not as easy to grasp as a pyramid. Hopefully people will find an umbrella (parabola) more easy to grasp.

There are good reasons why most people have overlooked the part played by structure. Let's restate our major claim using a 'mud map'.
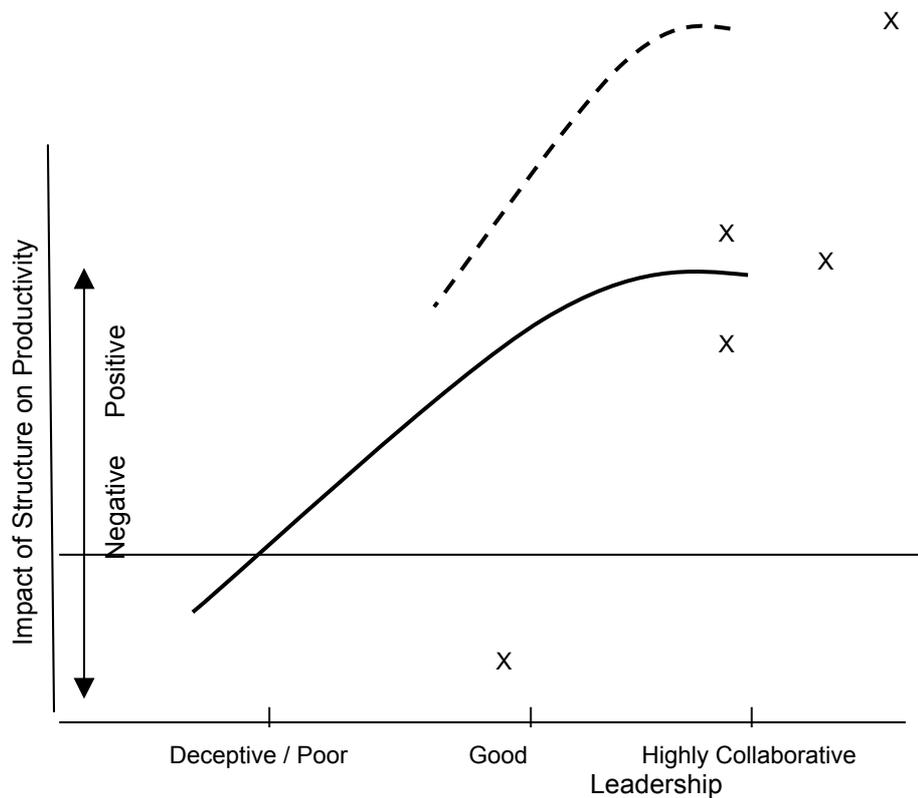
Figure 10 is a 'mud map synthesis' of the ideas expressed in this paper, so far.

The mud map in Figure 10 represents this paper's working hypothesis and summarizes the main propositions. The figure shows the Impact of Structure on Productivity as a function of Leadership. The line - - - - - - - - represents the parabolic structure. The line _____ represents the pyramidal structure. This paper proposes that the greatest productivity occurs when highly collaborative leadership is combined with a parabolic structure. Pyramidal structures have a negative effect on productivity in the presence of deceptive or poor leaders. The deceptive leader seeks to gain excessive status and / or control whilst professing the purest of motives publicly. The poor leader is either an incompetent or a laissez faire leader who believes that things will work out with a hands-off approach. Pyramidal structures can have a positive impact on productivity when combined with good (highly competent) and excellent leadership (highly collaborative leader).

Studies confirm much of data for the graph represented by _____ Katzenbach (1993). Studies confirm some of the data for the graph represented by ---------------- Getz (2009). Nevertheless from our own work, that of others and the literature there is considerable and growing theoretical and anecdotal evidence to support this paper's central proposition. Hull (2003), Bloom (2006), Odoi (2007), Keller et al (2010).

V.   PART THREE – RE PAY A HUGE PRICE WHILST WE DON'T RECOGNIZE THIS ELEPHANT.

When, in 1962, René Dumont published his *False Start in Africa* it soon became a best seller. It was based on over thirty years experience of working as an agronomist to increase agricultural yields in colonial French Africa. 'Black Africa,' said Dumont, 'had been degraded by Western intervention. However, the departure of the colonial rulers has not brought decolonisation, but a surfeit of often corrupt, exorbitantly paid, domestic officials. Administration has become the 'principal industry' in many states. Aid often helps to perpetuate this system, and the educational methods inherited from the Europeans turn

out only bureaucrats.' In a review of Dumont's work in the New Scientist Peter de Groot wrote 'Dumont's work suggests to me that human frailties - ego, greed, the jealous protection of professional status - stand in the way of development for the poor. We do not appear to have come very far since he made his perceptive observations. As Dumont said, 'It is a pity that failure is not readily acknowledged, and therefore seldom serves as a lesson to others . . ' de Groot, (1989)

But failure can never be adequately acknowledged until the reason for it is understood. The pyramidal structure, with its emphasis on serving those in positions above and its embedded values of status and control, underpins this failure and continues to do so to this day.

Speaking on the eve of his 75th birthday in 2006 Desmond Tutu said . . . .

> 'I naively believed that come liberation these ideals and attitudes would automatically be transferred to how you operated in the new dispensation . . . . we jettisoned very quickly those high ideals and this sense that you were there for the sake of the struggle and not for your own agrandisement . . . . We are not a special breed. We have feet of clay.'

Meldrum (2006)

And in 2008 the Kenyan government announced the appointment of 41 cabinet ministers and 52 assistant ministers. Africapress (2008)

Africans aren't the only people seeking gold Rolex watches and Mercedes Benz cars and the world can no longer afford such waste of resources and talent enabled by a flawed mental model of organizations. In order to move from our current model of organizations we need to look at the current one more critically. Interestingly Northern Africa provides another metaphor. Gareth Morgan, in his book *Images of Organizations* invites us to look behind the glossy postcard images of the great pyramid at Giza.

> '. . . It is estimated that its construction involved work by perhaps ten thousand persons over a period of twenty years. The pyramid is built from over 2,300,000 blocks of stone, each weighing two and one-half tons. These had to be quarried, cut to size, and transported over many miles, usually by water when the Nile was in flood. When we admire this and other pyramids today it is the incredible ingenuity and skill of the early Egyptians that probably strikes us both from an aesthetic and from an organizational standpoint. From another standpoint, however the pyramid is a metaphor of exploitation, symbolizing how the lives and hard labor of thousands of people were used to serve and glorify a privileged few. In the view of some organization theorists this combination of achievement and exploitation is a feature of organization throughout the ages. . . .'

Morgan (1996)

A new theory or new theories are needed. A number of people think the parabolic organizational model offers great promise and have been prepared to say so.

> 'We have been searching for a description for the type of organization that we want Melbourne Water to become. We want to be highly productive and people oriented. We want to be highly collaborative both internally and with all of our stakeholders. We want to be highly adaptive to meet the complexity of our current challenges in the context of a rapidly changing climate. Of all the terms that people use to describe organizations "parabolic" describes best what we are working towards becoming.'

Rob Skinner CEO Melbourne Water.

> 'I am an experienced manager and have read widely in the management literature and attended PD over many years. Peter's approach is radically different from other

leadership training I have ever done. I learned more from his program that the sum of all other training I have done in this area.'

Dr Maddy McMaster, Academic Registrar, RMIT University, Melbourne.

'I found it brilliant – lot's won't, but for me this is part of the journey that we need to be having and we need to do more and more.'

Kevin Scott, Assistant Commissioner of Police.

VI.   CONCLUSION – NOWARDS A BETTER PRACTICAL THEORY

The title of this paper, A Practical Theory To Help You Create A Brilliant Organization had its origins in Kurt Lewin's famous statement, *'There's nothing as practical as a good theory.'* I hope that you will agree that this theory is both 'practical' and 'good' and that as a result will change or be tempted to change the way you look at and think about organizations. However, for a range of reasons you may not agree. If one of those reasons is that you think you know a better theory or you that this is only a partial theory and needs considerable work would you please let me know. I will willingly give up this theory or adapt it if after a reasoned exploration by me and others we find significant flaws. The sooner we can apply the most practical theories the better.

Finally, this paper is a work in progress. As this goes to press more and more people and their organizations are adopting 'parabolic' perspectives. If you would like to know more about this work please email me, peter@leadershipaustralia.com.au

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