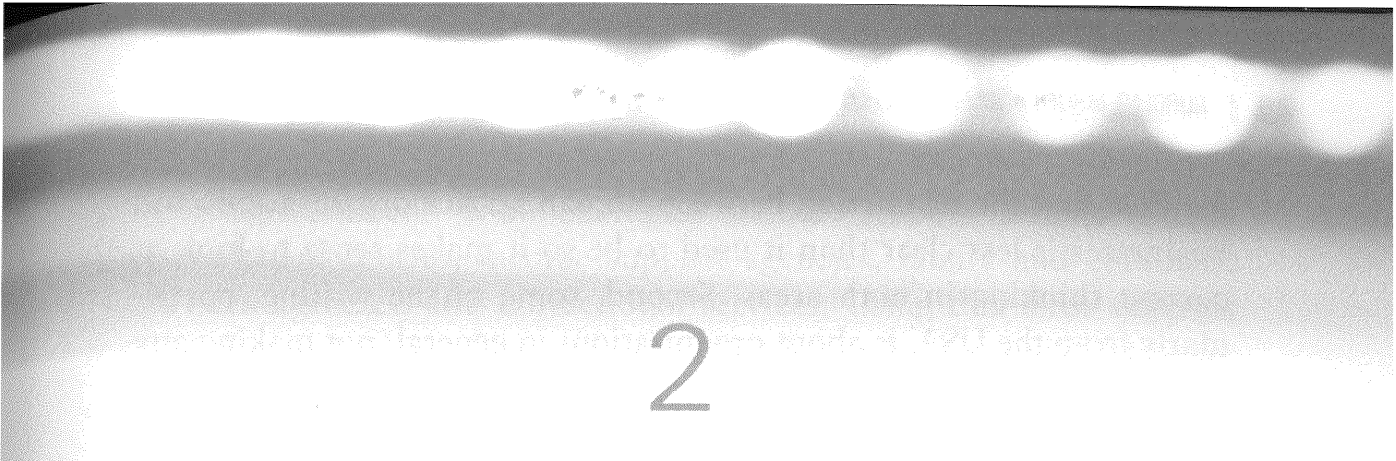




## 2

### ***Thinking about Organisations: Some Useful Theory***

**W**e can talk no more of *the* organization than we can talk of *the* mammal, no more describe one best way to run all organizations than prescribe one pair of glasses for all people....Too much effort has been wasted in trying to treat all organizations alike—governments that require the same procedures of all their ministries, conglomerates that do the same with their many divisions, consulting firms that seek to impose the latest technique on all their clients. (Mintzberg 1989:95)

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In Chapter 1 we looked at some of the current tensions for workers in human service organisations. We identified that one way of looking at what happens for workers is that they feel caught between competing expectations: the organisation expects them to operate in a business-like way with an emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness; in contrast, their professional training creates expectations of a focus on quality of service delivery, independent work, and, for some at least, community orientation and empowerment of clients.

How then can we manage these tensions in working effectively in human service organisations? A first step is being able to stand back from the organisation to look at it critically and creatively. It helps with this is to have an understanding of how human service organisations work; to think about how we define a human service organisation, how such organisations operate, what background ideas influence their management, and what new thinking is affecting them.

On this basis, this chapter explores current theory or thinking related to human service organisations. We will begin with theory that focuses on writing about human service organisations specifically, but then will include writing from the business literature too. There are two reasons

for this: first the distinction between human service organisations and businesses is less clear than it used to be so it makes sense to look at current thinking in both areas. Second, some of the writing, particularly from the USA, is about organisations in general, not making any distinction between human service and business-oriented organisations. Some of this literature is also relevant to thinking about human service organisations. In fact, ironically, some of this literature is more helpful in generating debate about some of the current tensions in working in human service organisations.

One of the debates is whether it is legitimate to talk about an organisation as if it had a life or existence of its own independent of its workers. While in one sense it is obviously true that an organisation cannot exist without workers, it is equally fair to say that organisations develop a momentum and culture that we experience as belonging to the organisation—that is, the organisation as a whole is distinct from the sum of its parts. Partly what I mean by this is that organisations often have a particular feeling about them—it may be easier to think of this in terms of businesses you have dealt with: some feel instantly friendly and welcoming, in others the consumer feels like an intruder. You wonder sometimes what has made the difference, as individually most of the staff seem approachable, but generally the atmosphere makes you reluctant to use the business again. Liddell's definition of an organisation suggests you need to think about both the organisation as a unit and the individual workers:

An organisation consists of individuals and groups of people who come together to pursue particular goals and objectives....It has identifiable boundaries—that is, you can distinguish it from its environment and from other organisations it relates to. The organisation has stability in the sense that it is in existence over a period of time, and it maintains relationships with and responds to individuals, groups and organisations in its environment. (Liddell 2003:7).

I am going to assume here that we can talk about the organisation as both an entity in itself and a collection of individual workers and their interactions.

## **What is a human service organisation?**

Human service organisation is the term most commonly used for health, welfare, and educational organisations, broadly defined as organisations whose focus is on providing some kind of service for people individually or in communities. They can be large or small, government,

or nongovernment. Some examples include: schools, hospitals, drug and alcohol centres, income support agencies, family and children's services agencies, and correctional services. Using this term suggests that there is 'a class of organisations that is involved in a distinctive set of activities with similar characteristics' (Jones and May 1992:82–3). Jackson and Donovan (1991:xi) see the common characteristic as 'the prime product is a service that is designed to optimise the welfare of the client', however client and welfare are defined. Liddell (2003:7) says 'Human service organisations have some particular characteristics, which derive from the fact that they are dealing with people and the complexities of human life'. Such definitions aim to distinguish human service organisations from businesses; sometimes human service organisations are called voluntary organisation or not-for-profit organisations to make this clear. However, some businesses obviously also deal with people. We will explore in the next section what is distinctive about human service organisations.

## What distinguishes a human service organisation?

There is some debate about what characteristics distinguish human service organisations—what is it that makes them similar to each other and different from businesses? As human service organisations have become more business-oriented, the lines have become more blurred. I am going to use Jones and May's (1992) three categories to identify human service organisations—purpose, technology (the nature of the work), and auspice.

### **Purpose**

In theory, you would expect purpose to be relatively consistent across human service organisations in its broadest sense—for example, 'to meet the needs and contribute to the well-being of their consumers, and to contribute to overall social welfare' (Jones and May 1992:84). The overall goals or vision of a human service organisation generally reflect an overall purpose like this (see the boxed examples following). It is important that the overall vision does express the broad hopes of the organisation, its best expectations, if you like. If there is no vision as a starting-point, it will be difficult ever to get close to such an ideal. However, the vision or overall purpose needs also to acknowledge the complexity of its purposes. As you can see from the examples in the box, organisations vary in how explicit they are about their purpose and their underlying values. It is useful with each statement to ask what the underlying values might be.

## Examples Mission or vision statements

### 1 Commonwealth Government of Australia:

#### *Department of Family and Community Services*

##### **Our vision—what we want to achieve**

A fair and cohesive Australia society.

##### **Our purpose—what we are here to do**

FaCS takes the lead and works with others to help families, communities and individuals build their self-reliance and make choices through:

- economic and social participation
- prevention and early intervention
- a responsive and sustainable safety net.

##### **Our three outcomes—the difference we will make**

FaCS has as its focus the following three key social policy outcomes:

- Outcome 1—Families are Strong
- Outcome 2—Communities are Strong
- Outcome 3—Individuals Reach Their Potential

(Family and Community Services Department 2004)

### 2 St Vincent's Health Mission & Values

Our mission is to bring the healing ministry of Christ to all we serve. Our concern for others, especially those in need, permeates every aspect of the life and work of our services.

We are dedicated to providing the best possible health care, drawing on the talents and creativity of our people and others who share our vision.

We express our mission through our daily work in hospitals, ambulatory services and multi-disciplinary clinics, research institutes, aged care services, hospices, outreach activities and in the home.

The values of the Sisters of Charity are the foundation of our mission. We will be guided by these values in our relationships with the people we serve and our partners. In all our activities we strive to demonstrate:

##### *Compassion*

Accepting people as they are, bringing to each the love and tenderness of Christ.

*Justice*

Acting with integrity and respecting the rights of all.

*Human Dignity*

Respecting the uniqueness of each person created in the image and likeness of God.

*Excellence*

Excelling in all aspects of our healing ministry.

*Unity*

Creating a community characterised by harmony and collaboration.

(St Vincent's Health 2004)

### 3 Berry Street Victoria

Our vision for Berry Street Victoria is that it continues to be responsive in working with children, young people, their families and the community to increase life opportunities and choices.

There are ten **Principles** that underpin our organisation, and we have also worked hard to articulate our **Values**.

#### **Values Statement**

The way we go about our work and how we treat each other is important. We have, therefore, articulated the key values, which are at the core of all our work.

The five values are:

- Courage
- Integrity
- Respect
- Accountability
- Working Together

All people who work for Berry Street Victoria are expected to carry out these values in the way they work, with their clients, team members, colleagues, business associates and the community.

#### **Our Principles**

Berry Street has ten principles underpinning the work that we do. We believe that:

- 1 Families generally provide the best opportunity to nurture children.
- 2 Children have a right to grow up in a consistent and nurturing family setting which is free of violence, abuse and neglect.
- 3 Where children and young people are unable to live with their families, they have a right to maintain positive family and community relationships.
- 4 Regardless of their point of entry to our services, our primary focus is on building on strengths to prevent further disadvantage.
- 5 Recognising and building on people's strengths is the most effective way to achieve change.
- 6 The best outcomes will be achieved by the active participation of all the key participants.
- 7 Continuous improvement will be achieved by encouraging feedback, creativity and the willingness to try new things.
- 8 A person's life opportunities and choices are affected by structural factors in society.
- 9 Service users have certain rights and responsibilities which together with Berry Street Victoria's rights and responsibilities, will guide the way we work together.
- 10 We have a responsibility to use our practice experiences and work with others to identify barriers, advocate for change and improve relevant social policies.

(Berry St. 2004)

## Reflective practice

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These are three quite different organisations: FaCS is a national family and community services government department based in a politically conservative liberal climate; St Vincent's Health is a large hospital underpinned by Christian values; Berry Street is a family and children's

services agency operating in a major city and in regional areas.

Think about your response to each of these. What does and doesn't appeal to you and why? What values are expressed and how do these fit with the values you would want to express as a professional?

In practice, the purpose is often complicated by the variety of expectations both within the organisation and from outside it. Hasenfeld (1992:3) talks about the inbuilt contradictions of human service organisations: ‘To the general public these organisations...are viewed as symbols of the caring society, a manifestation of the societal obligation to the welfare and well-being of its citizens. But they are also viewed as wasteful, fostering dependency, obtrusive and controlling ...Public assistance (income support), for example, serves both to alleviate misery and to deter “undeserving” poor’. Some of the tensions experienced by workers come from these contradictory views, which are shared with clients and which workers have often internalised themselves. This is particularly difficult in a culture where we expect clear answers rather than living with contradictions (see also the discussion on modernism and postmodernism in Chapter 3).

Part of this complexity is looking at the underlying purposes of human service organisations where social control or maintaining current social values and attitudes can be implicit in agency processes. Hasenfeld (1992) talks about the moral nature of work in such organisations, by which he means that decisions are constantly based on values. These may be implicit or explicit, subtle or blatant. Workers too may be more or less conscious of their own biases and preferences. For example, an income support worker confronted with two clients whose benefit has not arrived may be more sympathetic to a client who is perceived as neatly dressed and looks worried than one who is perceived as aggressive and messy. This is sometimes talked about as workers being expected to operate as agents of social control, of upholding standards of social behaviour, which is more explicit in some positions than others.

An obvious example of this is in child protection agencies where staff are expected both to create caring and nurturing relationships with clients but also to monitor them for reasonable standards of care of their children. The community expects workers both to keep children safe but also not to intrude ‘too much’ on the lives of families. Even talking about the community as if there is a unified view is unrealistic; community members will vary in how interventionist they expect workers to be. The politicians to whom the workers are answerable will have their own sensitivities—reactions to child deaths in various countries show that the political response is often significant in terms of policy change (Scott 1995; Markiewicz 1996). Workers can feel torn—should they listen to their own professional judgment, the

client's perspective, the organisation's expectations, the community's views, or the politics of the situation?

Obviously all organisations can have value tensions and the distinction between generating income and providing services is not always clear. More businesses are aiming to show social responsibility and talking about generating social or spiritual capital, expressing deeper values about their relationship to the community as well as making a profit (Zohar and Marshall 2004). Some voluntary organisations aim to generate income so that they can have some independence about how they operate. However, in commercial organisations, Weiner (1990:11) points out 'there is a clear, dominant value—making a profit'; otherwise organisations would not survive. In comparison, in 'public and private human service agencies...there are usually a number of conflicting values and...they all are equally viable'. He gives an example of a long-term facility for the elderly that changed its focus to traumatic brain-injured rehabilitation because it was more profitable and, presumably, equally needed. Some agencies have stopped providing services because the level of government funding meant they could not provide services of a quality they were happy with. Wrestling with diverse purposes and their related values is clearly part of working in human service organisations. Remembering to keep asking the question—what are we here for?—may be as important as naming the current answer.

### **The nature of the work**

A clear distinction between human service and other organisations is in the nature of the work—that is, human service organisations work with people rather than inanimate objects. How this is done is what some writers describe as the 'technology' of the organisation. The nature of this work varies immensely and it is often hard to define clearly. Central to the work is the relationship between the workers and the clients, whether the aim is to enable families to manage conflict more effectively or to provide information about how to stay healthy. However, individual workers and agencies will use a variety of approaches or tools as part of developing a relationship with clients and working on their issues. Some of these will be broad approaches, such as a solution-focused (Elliott et al. 2000), psychoanalytic (Nathan 2002), or cognitive behaviour approach, while others may be specific to the particular field of practice, such as using a risk framework in child protection.

What is actually used will vary over time, depending on what is seen as useful, the preferences of individual workers and agencies, and what is seen as effective. Liddell (2003) points out that the theory or approaches in favour shift over time, not necessarily for logical reasons. We need to be ‘considering what we lose when we prematurely or inappropriately abandon perspectives which may have served us well, in part and considering what this might mean for the perspectives we could or should apply to the social phenomena we research or evaluate’ (Liddell 2003:28).

Hasenfeld (1992) talks about people as the ‘raw material’, where the ‘core activities of the organization are structured to process, sustain or change people who come under its jurisdiction’ and that they are subjected to a ‘transformation process’. His language suggests a passive client, though he would say that the client can react to or participate in the process. It is certainly fair to say that clients often feel they are subjected to a process and a set of procedures rather than being active participants.

## Case scenario

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Tracy, an Aboriginal woman, contacted her local community health centre to ask about activities for her 13-year-old, Tony, who was starting to truant from school. The worker was concerned about whether Tony was being adequately cared for and contacted child protection and the school. Tracy was astonished and angry to receive phone calls from both child protection and the school welfare officer later in the day. She felt confident that she had worked out why Tony was truanting—he needed more help with school work and she had already organised tutoring. She also thought he needed more structured activities, which is why she had contacted the community health centre for ideas. From the worker’s response, Tracy felt assumptions had been made about her that as an Aboriginal parent she was not capable; she felt patronised and criticised rather than being seen as an active and caring parent who could have been involved in discussion.

A second problem with Hasenfeld’s focus is that it tends to assume that the clients are always the ones who need to change, rather than the community or organisation they are connected to. Some organisations or parts of organisations aim to work in ways that enable clients to generate change in the organisation: the example of the New

Fulford Family Centre in Bristol is one where clients form the Board of Management and have a significant influence in policy making (see Chapter 7). The Brotherhood of St Laurence Family Centre also demonstrates how clients can become participants in running organisations and sharing power over resources, relationships, information, and decision-making (Gilley 1990). Almost all participants agreed that participating in decision-making was important in terms of learning, receiving better-quality services, and more awareness of their own rights.

Given that the nature of the work is focused on people, human service organisations must take into account the current community norms about how people should be treated. Community views about what is reasonable change over time. This is often complicated for professional workers due to their own professional values, which may well differ from community norms. Another complication can be the conflict between the organisation's values and individuals in the community. Some issues are relatively clear—for example, while some parents would still advocate corporal punishment, general community and agency standards would now be in agreement that this is not acceptable. However, others are less clear: the community may be concerned about young children that seem to be out late at night but, on its own, that is not likely to be a cause for major concern for child protection. The aged care system and the community may consider that an older person should be in nursing home care, but that person may value their independence more than their safety. The key for human service organisations is that having the debate about issues remains central rather than settling for routines and rules. Workers and the organisation need to continue to wrestle with asking what is the fairest, most empowering approach given the individual and the community context.

A critical issue for human service organisations is being able to show that they are effective. This is not easy to do, partly because it is often difficult to agree on what being effective means. This relates to the tension workers can feel when pressured to work to established routines and procedures (discussed in Chapter 1). There is a lot of debate around what to measure and how to measure it. Sometimes the emphasis seems to be on relatively easy to measure information—how many clients have been seen at a community health centre, how many young people completed school in a given year, how many patients have been discharged from hospital within a prescribed number of days from an operation. Longer-term and qualitative measures of what has happened are more difficult to evaluate. What does it mean to say

that 80 per cent of clients expressed satisfaction with a service or that 70 per cent saw the client–worker relationship as significant in their recovery? It is often not clear what exactly it is that makes a difference in human services work. Workers, clients, and the organisation all have their views, and these are not necessarily the same.

Clearly, it is important to check effectiveness. We can have an intuitive sense of what works but not necessarily be right. Organisations vary in how they evaluate their work and tools for evaluation will be considered in more depth in Chapter 9.

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## Reflective practice

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Josie works in a community-based service supporting older people to remain in their own homes. She has just had a phone call from Jane Brown whose mother Maisie Brown is 90 years old. Jane and her family are about to move interstate because of her husband's work and she says she will be constantly worried about her mother unless she moves into a hostel. Maisie does have some chronic health issues but has been able to live on her own with support from aged care services and her daughter visiting regularly. Josie has already had an agitated phone call

from Maisie saying what's most important to her is continuing to live independently at home. Two days later, Maisie has a fall and breaks her hip; Jane is confirmed in her views, but Maisie is still adamant she wants to live at home. How then is the decision to be made? How can both voices be heard? What impact does the worker's personal experience have? What might the general views in the community be? What might Maisie's community think? How would you evaluate effective intervention in this case?

### Auspice

Auspice is about how organisations are mandated, which generally connects with how they are funded. Human service organisations are generally, though not always, publicly funded. What they are called and how they are differentiated varies depending on the country. Some human service organisations are government departments, whose employees are required to work according to legislation and govern-

ment-influenced procedures. These are at different levels—national, state, and regional. Government organisations are often expected to be responsive to changes in political parties and their policies. Being a government department can mean that there is a higher expectation of responding to community concerns, although this is not always the case. Workers can find it either a positive or negative experience, depending on the particular situation and their own values. It may be, for example, that a media report about a nursing home results in quick closure when workers on the ground have been expressing concern for some time. Alternatively, workers may be frustrated by rapid changes in income security policy that limit benefits because of media debate about fraud.

Many other human service organisations are also funded by government, but are auspiced or managed by another agency. These may be called voluntary agencies, nongovernment agencies, or community-based agencies. Depending partly on history, they may be church-based agencies, belong to local communities or regional communities, they may have developed in response to a specific issue, or be an off-shoot of an existing organisation. They will generally have some kind of board or committee of management to oversee the organisation, which will work with the senior worker in the organisation, usually called something like an executive director, director, coordinator, or manager. Legally, every agency must have a constitution that will spell out its structure and the allocation of responsibility. It can be useful to look at this to be clear about how the auspice works. There are some organisations where this is quite complicated—some church organisations, for example, have loyalty to their church organisation, while others are relatively independent.

## Agencies

- St Luke's, an Anglican nongovernment agency in regional Victoria, has a Board of Management. Of the Board's eight members, three are appointed by the local Anglican Bishop, one is appointed by the Uniting Church Presbytery, and four are community members. This represents the history of the organisation, as it began as a part of the Anglican church in Victoria in cooperation with the Uniting Church.

- Centacare, an Australia-wide nongovernment agency auspiced by the Catholic Church, also has a Board of Management for local branches. Its local Board has eight members, all of whom have to be approved by the local bishop.
- Bendigo Community House, a locally focused service, is funded by the State Government and supplemented by other grants. The house has a volunteer Committee of Management made up of interested people from the local area. The Committee is voted in (if voting is needed) by members at its Annual General Meeting.

Although these agencies operate at arms-length from government they have of course, to be answerable for their funding. Currently, governments, in the Western world at least, seem to be favouring funding nongovernment organisations often through some kind of tendering or competitive process. Depending on their philosophy, some governments argue that this is a more efficient way of delivering services, as it requires agencies to justify why they should receive funding, and that it allows the market to determine which agencies survive. Others consider that there is a conflict of interest in both funding a service and running it and that nongovernment agencies can be closer to the community and so to the consumer. Liddell (2003:42) suggests that this is doubtful in practice and adds that being privatised has led to nongovernment agencies ‘being more controlled than before’. A tendering process can mean that agencies have to agree to provide services in predetermined ways that do not necessarily suit the context they are working in. Sometimes, where there is room for negotiation, this means considerable time is needed to reach an agreement about what will be funded, how services are to be delivered, and how the agency will be accountable. This can also create tensions in various ways. The agency and funding body do not always agree about what most needs to be funded. Agencies may feel that if they argue too much, the funding body can always look elsewhere. For some programs, agencies must compete with other agencies to run services. This creates a sense of uncertainty that means agencies feel less confident about challenging the system. It can also create a division in the community as agencies are aware they will be competing with each other. However, it is important to remember that agencies are made up of individuals who can form cooperative working relationships.

## Case scenario

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This is a 'catch 22' that I have experienced in various forms: suppose for example that an agency has been providing accommodation for young people under the age of 16 who have left their families because of conflict with their parents. The agency works hard with young people and their families to resolve conflict and so less alternative accommodation is needed; instead the funding is used for counselling or mediation. The agency could argue that it is achieving what both it and the funding agency really want—that is, that young people are safely looked after and their family relationships are intact. However, the agency is no longer living up to the initial agreement and the funding body may then reduce the funding, which will in turn mean the agency is no longer able to provide counselling and mediation. Ideally, of course the agency and funding body will negotiate and resolve this issue, but it is surprising how much effort it can take to resolve such a difference.

The other implication of being publicly funded is that human service organisations are likely to be affected by political processes. A change of government, for example, may signal a change in approach to funding. There have been quite dramatic examples over the last 20 years of changes in government policy impacting on human service organisations. I have experienced one government deciding to stop funding consumer advocacy groups, while another moved to zero tolerance for drug use rather than harm minimisation. More subtle changes might reflect government policy about the place of family—for example, a change from more services supporting young people to be independent to more services supporting young people to stay at home. Specific events can also have an impact: the death of a child was significant in the introduction of mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse in Victoria. Workers often have mixed feelings about the impact of the political process: on the one hand, it reinforces that this is an active democracy, on the other it can mean that professional views are made to feel redundant.

Most human professional organisations do employ professional workers as a major part of the workforce. This again can create tensions within the organisation between those who believe they have a right to use their professional knowledge in a relatively autonomous way and those who believe that they must work within the processes and procedures of the organisation. We will look at this issue in more detail in the next section, when we think about bureaucracies.

Essentially, human service organisations are generally defined as:

- providing services for people and/or their communities
- having a focus on services for people, rather than goods
- having relationships between clients and workers central to the work of the organisation
- making a profit or generating income is not a primary aim
- being at least partly publicly funded in general, with implications for being affected by political decision-making
- employing people trained in working with people more often—that is, professional workers
- having a significant value base to their work
- doing work that is diverse, complex, and flexible.

It is the combination of these that is important in defining human service organisations. Obviously, some of these factors relate to other organisations too. Dentists and naturopaths provide services for people; human service organisations may employ carpenters and gardeners. There are complications with others. For example, although human service organisations are not aiming to make a profit, some would certainly aim to generate an income, perhaps to maintain some independence from public funding or to be able to develop innovative programs. Agencies may want to work according to values but experience the tension of having to run programs within government funding limits. Agreement about the importance of a value base does not mean that it is easy to reach consensus about what those values should be.

## Organisational structures

How an organisation is structured affects its workers and clients. The structure often implies a set of values and beliefs about roles and responsibilities, how decisions should be made and standards maintained. Writers about organisations have tended in the past to suggest that ‘there was one best way to manage and to organise’ (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998). The best structure was seen as one ‘with a rigid hierarchy of authority, spans of control no greater than six, heavy use of strategic planning, and so on’ (Mintzberg 1989:110). Mintzberg suggests that the older and larger an organisation the more likely it is to have a formal and centralised structure, partly because this is the most obvious way to control an organisation. This kind of organisation is what Mintzberg would call a ‘machine’ organisation, essentially a bureaucracy—that is, an organisation where there is a ‘pull to

*rationalize*, ideally through the standardization of work processes, encouraging only limited horizontal decentralization...need for routine efficiency'(Mintzberg 1989:111). He contrasts this with a professional configuration where there is a 'pull to *professionalise* in order to minimise the influence that others, colleagues as well as line and technocratic administrators have over their work...(this has) full horizontal and vertical decentralization of power to the operating core, with coordinating achieved largely through the standardization of knowledge and skills'. Some organisations, of course, try to combine the two—which may give rise to the tensions we have already articulated between the organisation's desire for a more business-oriented, efficient approach and the worker/professional's desire for a more flexible, value-based approach. We will return to Mintzberg's configurations later in the chapter, but given that most human service workers are in bureaucracies we will start with exploring the nature of bureaucracies.

## The nature of bureaucracies

The vast majority of human service organisations are bureaucracies. This is a statement about the structure of the organisation; rather than making a value judgment about it. Not only government departments are bureaucratic, but also many large agencies, whether they are private or public, headed by a committee of management, a board, or a department head. Size is what often determines an organisation taking on a bureaucratic structure (Mintzberg 1989). As small organisations grow, they generally seem to take on a more hierarchical and bureaucratic structure. This is not necessarily so, however, and other possible structures will be considered later in the chapter. It would be extremely unusual to find a human services worker who has not at some point worked in an organisation structured along bureaucratic lines, or who has not had considerable contact with bureaucratic organisations in the course of their work. Bureaucracies are very much part of our culture and, to be an effective worker, we need to be able to find ways to work within and/or with them. However, bureaucracies do differ, and like other organisations, can be open to influence and change. Individuals and teams within bureaucracies can develop their own culture for managing their work.

We tend to think of bureaucracies as large, inflexible, and unyielding organisations that are likely to be a constant struggle to work in. It is important to balance this picture (which is undoubtedly often true), with acknowledging that bureaucracies can also be open to

change, respond to pressure, and allow freedom to operate. My own experience of working in bureaucracies reflects this mixture: I have experienced many of the frustrations, from realising that you can not move a piece of furniture without filling in a form to endless wrestling with rules about program guidelines that did not quite fit the situation of particular clients. However, I have also experienced times within bureaucracies where new ideas were welcomed, I had considerable freedom to operate within broad role guidelines, and I could influence program development. Matheson's article on organisational structures in the Australian Public Service, for example, confirms that within certain areas of the public service:

it is possible to locate organic structures which survive within the interstices of the formal structure. Where organic structures do exist, then it is usually for those reasons that have been identified as favouring such structures generally, namely that the work is non-routine, employees are highly qualified and projects are of a relatively short duration. In addition, collaborative structures are suitable where there exists a high level of uncertainty concerning future organisational activity and high levels of dependency on other organisations. (Matheson 1996)

These are common conditions for public sector organisations.

The German sociologist, Max Weber (1964), named the concept of bureaucracy. He was interested in looking at forms of organisation, based on power and authority and particularly in what makes people follow instructions. He explored the difference between charismatic authority, traditional power (from a hereditary position), and authority with a rational-legal basis. This third type of authority forms the basis for bureaucracies where 'conformity comes from following formalised rules and procedures, and working within clear-cut structures' (Coulshed and Mullender 2001:29). Importantly, the structure is made up of specific positions, rather than individuals. Weber defined bureaucracies as having a clear-cut division of labour, duties allocated through formal administrative hierarchy (i.e. each worker supervised by the worker above), a prescribed system of rules and procedures, exclusion of personal considerations from conduct of business, and employees having technical qualifications and experience related to job description and requirements.

One of the tensions of working in human service organisations often relates to the underlying bureaucratic structure. Using a bureaucratic model suggests a certain mindset or belief system. For example, there is an underlying assumption that rules and procedures are needed,

that a more fluid approach would not be effective. Many of the rules of the bureaucracy are about keeping control, about having power over people who should be kept in check in some way—both workers and clients. Discretion is seen as negative, whereas rules mean that there will be consistency and fairness. Many of the rules about income security distribution, for example, are based on assumptions about people wanting to exploit the system, rather than assuming people will and can ask for what they need. These values are not generally ones that workers in human service organisations agree with and are likely to be different from the explicit values of the organisation. This underlying clash of assumptions can also cause conflict: the structure implies that a more senior manager will have more knowledge, experience, and certainly decision-making capacity. Staff further down the hierarchy may feel they know more about what is happening on the ground and how policy is impacting on people in the community, but find it hard to have this form of knowledge recognised.

Another clear implication of a bureaucratic structure is that the more levels you have, the further it is between the worker on the ground and the senior manager of the organisation. Just like on a mountain, as you go higher your perspective changes. Senior managers are often more aware of the wider political agenda, they need to be abreast of the current issues, opportunities for funding, and agency development and innovation. A good senior manager is likely to be an able networker making sure they are conscious of what is happening internally and externally. They also are under pressure to ensure, for example, that nothing goes wrong that will be seen negatively politically, and that the agency is accountable for expenditure and effective service delivery. From high up the mountain, the needs and issues for clients can seem very distant compared to the staff working directly with them. Direct service, or on-the-ground, staff are more likely to be conscious of both the rewards and difficulties of client work, the gaps in funding, and the need for different processes and relationships with other organisations. Middle managers often feel caught in the middle, that they are the ‘meat in the sandwich’; from part of the way up the mountain, they are aware of the issues for clients and workers, but also have a clearer idea of the issues concerning more senior managers. Often they end up trying to communicate across the two levels. This is partly because the nature of the bureaucratic structure is to encourage people to think in levels, and that staff have to work up through the levels.

## Case scenario

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Jane had been working in a community health agency for several years as a generalist counsellor. She noticed that she seemed to be having more older men as clients, often men who had been made redundant or had to leave work early for health reasons and were now feeling depressed and somewhat isolated. She suggested to her manager, John, that the health centre should run a group so that the men could meet with others in similar situations. Her manager felt this was outside the funding guidelines for their service, so initially refused, suggesting Jane talk to the local community house. The community house worker did not feel she had the skills to run group sessions but was happy to offer a venue. Jane wrote a proposal outlining how she felt a group would fit the program guidelines, be a more effective way of using her resources, and build links with the community centre. She sent this to her manager with a copy to the centre's program director, Fred. Eventually she was able to develop the group. Jane concluded that she needed to be persistent in order to gain more flexibility in her work role and to build an argument that would appeal to managers.

In some organisations, this is reinforced by informal rules. All organisations have informal rules as well as formal ones. As Coulshed and Mullender (2001:33) say, 'organisations are living entities, imbued with the characteristics and inter-relationships of the staff who people them'. People inevitably express their views about how things should be done in ways that become expectations of each other or informal rules. A formal rule would be that workers are responsible to a specific line manager. In some organisations, the informal rules would support this—people would share stories about the negative impact of breaking this rule. In other organisations, the informal rules are more flexible and people communicate more freely across levels. There are clear advantages of this in terms of information flow. It can also mean that people at all levels of the organisation can share perspectives—the equivalent of travelling regularly up and down the mountain. Senior managers then stay more in touch with client issues, and direct service workers are more conscious of the broader political context they are operating in.

Some key attributes of bureaucracies are:

- hierarchical structure, with the number of levels varying depending generally on the size of the organisation

- each level has specified levels of responsibility and decision-making
- positions are created, with job descriptions that workers then apply to fill
- work is based on accepted rules and procedures
- a high degree of division of labour/specialisation
- emphasis on precision and reliability—consistency of decision-making
- recruitment on the basis of ability and knowledge/qualification.

### **What does bureaucracy mean for working in human service organisations?**

There are obvious limitations for human service workers in bureaucracies, particularly in the traditional sense. First, bureaucracies were initially seen as appropriate forms of management for routine tasks that needed to be performed in a consistent manner. While clearly some human service tasks fit this criteria, most do not. This also disregards the importance of the process, that how something is done can be as important as achieving a task. Given that most work in human service organisations involves workers and clients relating in some way, this is a major issue.

A second major limitation is the tension within the bureaucratic structure when the organisation wants workers to focus on fairly narrow functions in a work environment dealing with complexity. Cowley (1999:11) says, for example, ‘The expectation that people can be relied on to carry out only single predictable functions does little to improve flexibility within a rapidly changing world: it also creates the task focus and fragmentation that offends many nurses... the holistic nature of nursing is rendered “invisible and devalued within the system”.’ This links to the question of professional independence; the capacity for trained workers to be able to exercise judgments on the basis of their specialised knowledge and experience.

Human service organisations with a bureaucratic structure deal in various ways with the tension between the desire for control and consistency, and the complex world of clients. Coulshed and Mullender (2001:31) say, ‘There is a debate as to how far managerialism has superseded professional work by imposing centralised control, or whether professional autonomy is retained at the point at which social workers and care managers continue to make individual judgments in complex cases and perhaps to find other space in which to manoeuvre’. Interestingly, critical reflection is beginning to be seen as a way to enable

professionals to look more critically at the context in which they work as well as their assumptions and values about practice. This may be one of the tools for professionals to use to manage these tensions. Tools for critical reflection will be explored in more detail in Chapter 9.

A related issue here is the division that can emerge in bureaucratic human service organisations between those who are seen as the professional workers—often, though not always those providing direct services—and those who administer the services. I am not talking about managers here so much as the administrative staff—for example, receptionists, workers in finance, and personnel. Sometimes this becomes divisive; a ‘them and us’ mentality develops, with professionals seeing themselves as upholding the vision of the organisation to care for clients and the administrators as those more concerned with efficiency and control of resources. Administrators may resent what they see as the relative freedom of the professional staff to plan their work, or feel that the client work is more interesting and valued. Professional staff may envy the relative predictability of life for administrators—for example, that they will be able to go home at five o’clock and resent what they see as ‘nit-picking’ about details.

Part of this is the vexed issue of discretion; should professional workers be able to exercise discretion and if so how much? Lipsky’s explorations of worker discretion raise difficult questions. Front-line workers value their ability to use discretion and partly have it ‘because society does not want computerized public service and rigid application of standards at the expense of responsiveness to the individual situation’ (Lipsky 1980:23). However, this responsiveness can work well or badly. While workers generally use discretion to support and advocate for clients, some may use discretion to control client behaviour in negative ways—for example, by neglecting clients or requiring them to come in to the office unnecessarily. Because the worker has the power to use their discretion, the client is unlikely to feel able to question the need for the visit or to complain about how they are treated. Management may devise regulations to limit the potential for negative discretion or unfair treatment, but this can again cause conflict between professionals and the administrative staff who are expected to carry out the rules.

This polarisation is an unhealthy one, often limiting the capacity of both groups to work together. It is also an artificial distinction in many ways: there is a sense in which all staff are likely to be professional in their attitude to their work—that is, seeing their work as skilled and

requiring training, and wanting it to be of a high standard. Organisations can manage this well: developing goals together helps so that everyone is committed to the same overall plan. Sharing information is key to this, so that each group in the organisation understands the pressures on the other. It helps receptionist staff to know where you are and when you might be back, so that they do not end up with disgruntled clients being angry with them. It is also important to recognise that both sets of functions are needed in the organisation: direct service workers need support staff (e.g. for cars to be able to visit clients); we all want to be paid for our work. Without the professionals there would be no need for administrators.

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## Case scenario

Jane was becoming increasingly frustrated with Dennis, the budget officer in her section who always refused her submissions for extra funding for clients. One day she decided that she would talk to him about the particular family she was working with. As she talked, Dennis was clearly moved by the client's story. He explained that the way she had written the application made it difficult for him to approve it, but that if she added part of what she had told him, the application would fit the guidelines. Jane left, pleased that she had gained the funding for her client but also thinking that she had learnt an important lesson about how to work within her organisation. She realised that Dennis, like her, had to work to restrictions and rules and that they could jointly find a compromise.

Another aspect of this in human service organisations is about who the senior managers are in terms of their background and interests. In some organisations, the managers will have similar backgrounds to direct service. 'Having been there' managers are likely to have experience and knowledge that helps them understand the issues for staff quickly. The other side of this is that managers may therefore assume that the strategies that worked for them will work for their workers, even though the current context and culture may be different. In some organisations, managers will not have had similar or even related work experience to those 'on the ground'. This fits with the managerial model that would say that management skills are transferable across all organisations. While this is true to a degree, it is also true that this model expects managers to make what are sometimes major shifts that mean

staff feel they are constantly educating their manager about the complexity of issues. It can also mean that staff feel that decisions are made without a real understanding of their and the client's perspective. Educating the manager can become a daunting but necessary task.

Senior managers also have to contend with other limitations of the bureaucratic model. They too may feel 'sandwiched' like middle managers. They need to be aware of and balance the competing expectations of groups in the environment. In theory, in a bureaucratic model, managers are simply responsible to their employing body. In practice, they often have to manage the competing demands of other interested parties: depending on the organisation, these could include: other organisations providing similar or related services, some of which may be competing for funding; consumer groups; advocacy groups, including peak bodies, unions, employer organisations, and professional associations. They are likely to also have to be sensitive to changing political preferences.

### Teams in human service organisations

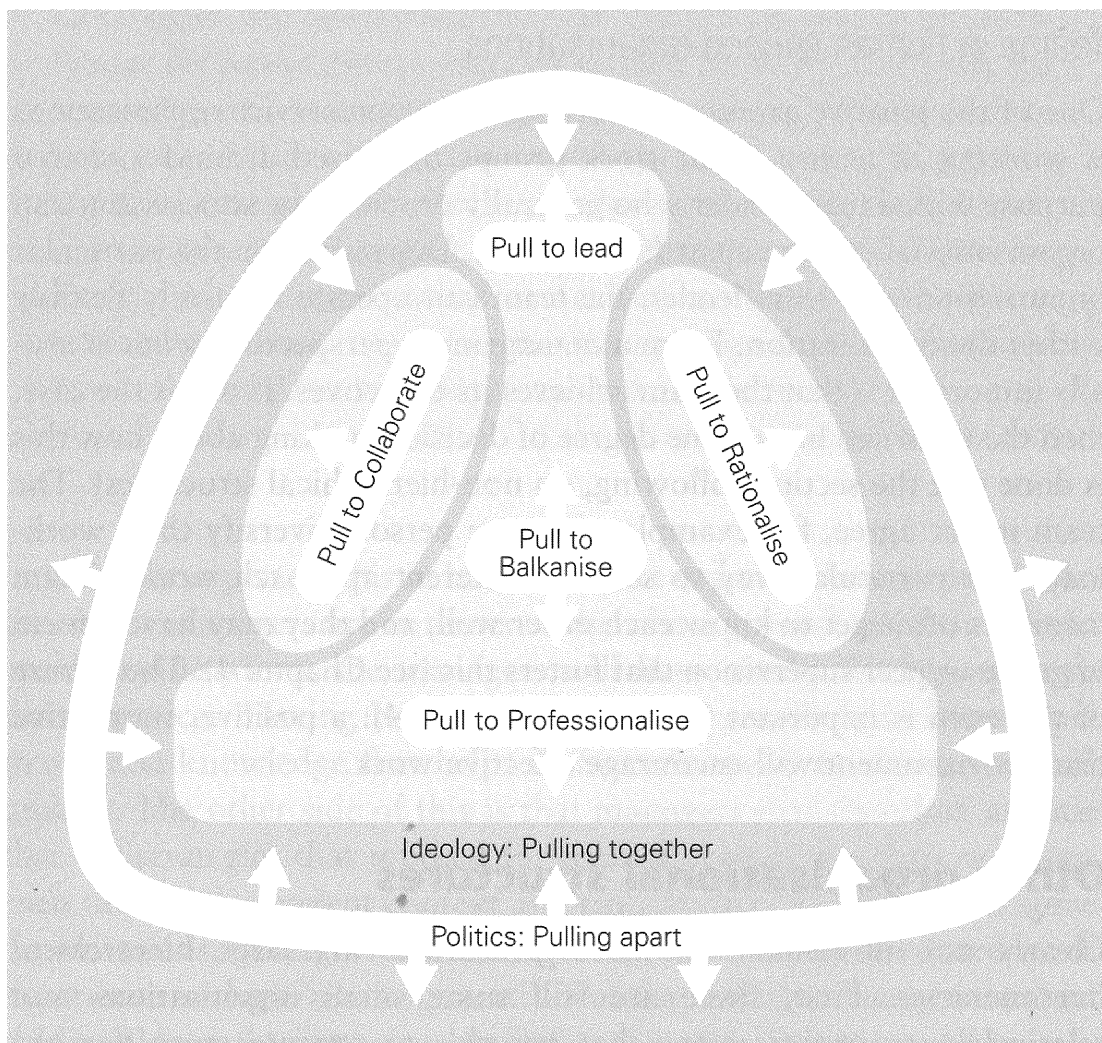
One of the positive aspects of working in human service organisations is working in teams: small work groups organised around a shared purpose with a team leader who generally provides the supervision and organisational management for the team. Depending on the particular organisation and team leader, the team can operate relatively flexibly within the organisation. From a management perspective, what is usually important is that the team achieves its objectives. If this is the case, then the team can have some degree of decision-making about how this is done (see the section following, on non-hierarchical structures). The team might agree, for example, that one person diversify their workload in a particular way to see if a different approach works. Team members often get to know each other well, and they may have a form of group or peer supervision that fosters this (see Chapter 4). The culture of the team is important (again, see Chapter 4): a positive, supportive team environment will encourage effective work.

### Other organisational structures

Clearly not all human service organisations are large hierarchical bureaucracies. First, there are still some small organisations and relatively new organisations that are able to operate more flexibly. Mintzberg (1989) has a useful way of thinking about organisational structure. From studying a wide range of organisations, he suggests

that each can be thought about in terms of six elements, which together make up different configurations. The six elements are:

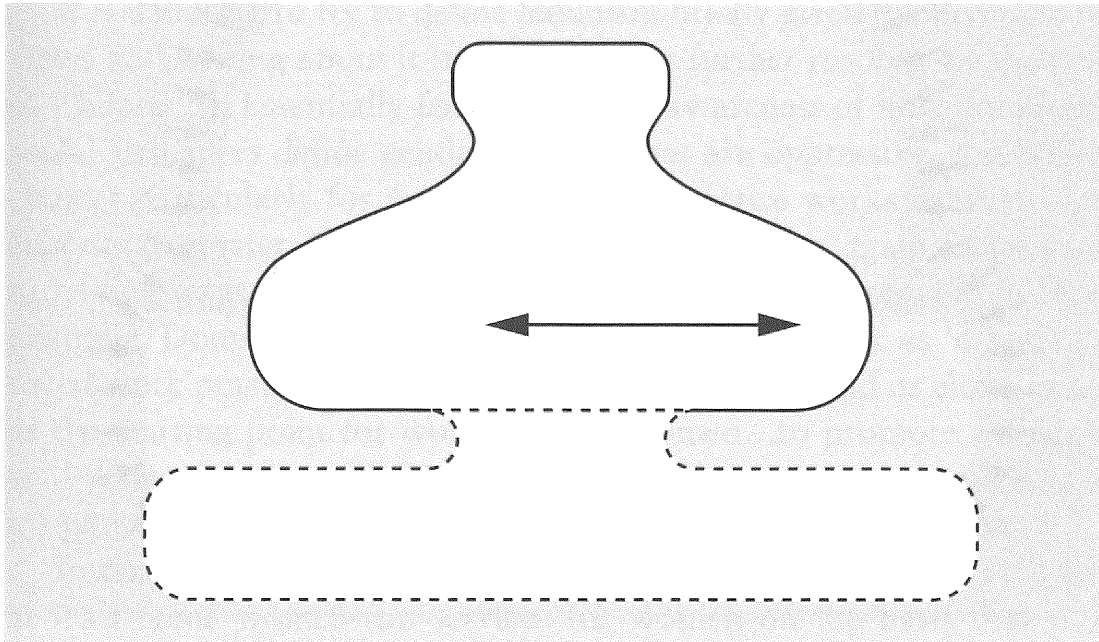
- 1 Operating core—people who perform the basic work of providing services.
- 2 Strategic apex—senior manager/s, those with overall responsibility who may also generate a vision for the agency.
- 3 Middle line—middle managers.
- 4 Technostructure—analysts/administrators who aim to plan and control formally the work of others.
- 5 Support staff—those who provide services like public relations, counselling to staff, services to staff.
- 6 Ideology—the ‘traditions and beliefs of an organization that distinguish it from other organizations and infuse a certain life into the skeleton of its structure’ (Mintzberg 1989:113).



**Figure 2.1** Basic pulls on the organisation

Source: Mintzberg (1989:111)

Depending on where the energy is in the organisation, one or more of these elements will have more power and this can alter the structure. If, for example, the operating core is professionals with a strong sense of autonomy and professional decision-making, the structure is likely to be flatter with more decision-making at the bottom. If the manager has a strong desire to control and direct the workings of the organisation to particular goals, it is likely to be more steeply hierarchical. If ideology or culture is the dominating force, the organisation is likely to have a flat structure—there is a higher degree of confidence that goals will be shared.

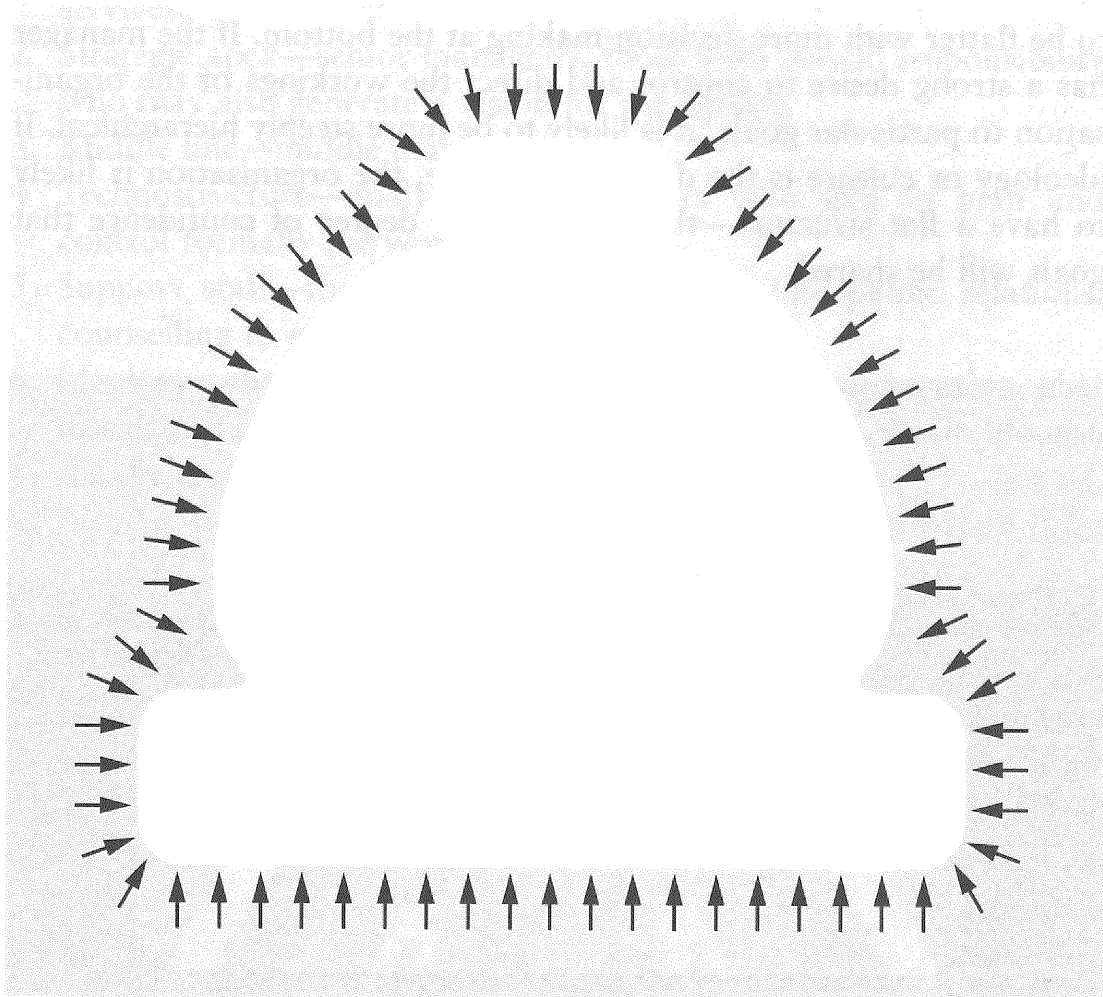


**Figure 2.2** The innovative organisation

Source: Mintzberg (1989:114)

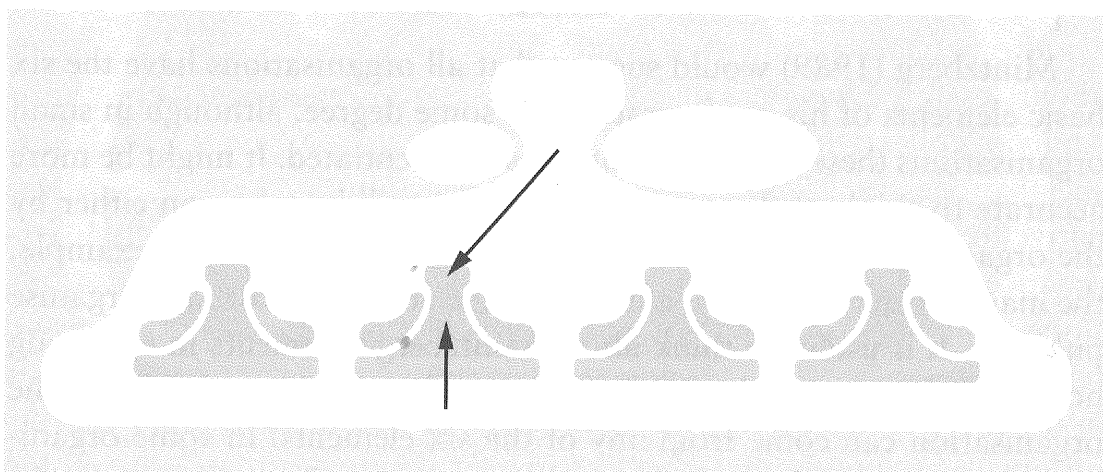
Mintzberg (1989) would suggest that all organisations have the six basic elements of his configurations to some degree, although in small organisations these roles may not be as differentiated. It might be more accurate to think of these as functions that will be taken on either by the organisation as a whole or by particular individuals. For example, the manager may also have a caseload; the administrator may organise publicity. It is useful to think about Mintzberg's elements in exploring how varied organisational structures can be and how change in the organisation can come from any of the six elements. In some organisations, for example, it feels as if there is significant power in the 'technostructure'—that is, the administrative arm of the organisation.

Professionals feel restrained by the rules and procedures imposed by the administrators.



**Figure 2.3** The missionary organisation

Source: Mintzberg (1989:114)



**Figure 2.4** The diversified organisation

Source: Mintzberg (1989:113)

## Non-hierarchical structures/approaches

This section will particularly consider non-hierarchical structures—the opposite, you could say, of bureaucracies. I am going to start by exploring a feminist approach to working in organisations because this approach has had a considerable impact in thinking about how to work in non-hierarchical structures. This also makes a useful link between this chapter and Chapter 3, where we will look at how to use a variety of theories to encourage different thinking about organisations and how they operate. Feminist thinking is also a useful example here because it makes explicit how an ideology can be applied to organisational practices.

It is daunting to try to define feminism briefly given the diversity of views and writing about it (for ideas about further reading see the end of Chapter 3). Essentially feminism raises awareness of how dominant social structures define gender in ways that are oppressive, restricting choices particularly for women. Feminist practice works in ways that encourage greater choice and equality generally, but again focuses on providing ways for women to be able to operate more powerfully. For example, Dominelli (2002) defines feminist social work as ‘a form of social work practice which takes gendered inequality and its elimination as the starting point for working with women...to promote women’s well-being as women define it....It also seeks to ensure that feminist insights are used to improve the well-being of children and men’.

In terms of working in organisations, feminists have advocated for at least some women-run services for women on the basis that this allows women greater opportunities to find their own voice. Such services have generally been run on non-hierarchical lines, partly as a way of finding an alternative to a bureaucratic model seen as representing a more patriarchal form of organisation. Weeks (1994:134), writing about lessons from feminist women’s services, says that the ‘philosophy of collectivity is the central expression of women’s historical and social processes. It is conscious political action to develop an alternative to the hierarchy of patriarchal relationships...trying to put into practice the feminist vision of democratic process in social relationships’. The organisation then becomes a place for people to experience relating in a new, cooperative, mutually empowering way, rather than in the more competitive, disempowering form of most modern organisations. The aim is that this experience would translate into other spheres to generate broader social change.

So how might this translate into principles for working in women's organisations? These are likely to include:

- acknowledging the centrality of women's experiences as a form of knowledge
- ensuring the voices of all women involved are heard, particularly those who have been least heard
- making connections between personal experience and social issues
- working collectively using participatory decision-making processes
- seeking social change by operating in an alternative way from the dominant culture and working towards a more inclusive and less oppressive society.

How do these principles translate into practice? And how does that compare with other groups, such as environmental groups and housing cooperatives, who work collectively? These groups all generally have a flatter structure partly because, in Mintzberg's terms, they share an ideology, so the need for control from above is reduced. The structure may also reflect a desire, as it has in the women's movement, to try to live out an ideology about the sharing of power and decision-making. Language is important here; such organisations have often made their way of operating explicit by being called something like a collective or a cooperative.

The flat structure has implications for the organisation in terms of how labour is divided, leadership shared, and having participatory models of service delivery. Ideally each worker and/or committee member has equal decision-making power and responsibility. Individuals may take on particular roles for a period of time, for example, being the spokesperson for the organisation or being the coordinator. However, generally the underlying philosophy is that all tasks could be shared and that each person should have the opportunity to learn all of the skills needed in the organisation. This can also be the approach in small organisations with a committee of management and one or two staff. Although they may not see themselves as a collective in the same way, the committee and staff member/s may agree that tasks need to be shared and come to a mutual agreement about how this will be done.

Some agencies trying to operate as a collective do end up with a staff member designated as a manager or coordinator. Often this is a condition of funding from organisations that find it difficult to deal with organisations that have a flat structure. This can cause tensions within the organisation, especially if it means that some staff are paid more than others. Some organisations decide that in a society where

having a coordinator is the norm it is easier to have one, while aiming to maintain a sense of shared decision-making. This can create tensions in itself, particularly for the coordinator. Weeks (1994) compared how coordinators in women's services saw their roles with women managers in the public service. She found that the women's service coordinators emphasised a 'group centred model of leadership' (Weeks 1994:169); seeing their role as facilitating, empowering, and encouraging cooperative working relationships and shared decision-making. In comparison, the public service managers talked about being 'out in front', active, initiating, being senior in terms of hierarchy (Weeks 1994:170). Notice the differences in language here, even in naming the roles. Weeks points out that both models have advantages and disadvantages. Collectives can concentrate so much on getting the process right that tasks are never accomplished. Too much consultation can become frustrating.

Collective agencies—and small agencies run by committees of management—generally prefer consensus decision-making—that is, making decisions that all those involved accept as reasonable. 'Consensus requires a group that is willing to work together and trust there is a solution, as well as patience and perseverance. It requires us to come to meetings with our minds not fixed on a particular solution or position; in the light of hearing all the possible positions we may modify ours' (Shields 1991:97). Making decisions by consensus can be a slow process but has the advantage that once the decision is made everyone is highly likely to support it. This can contrast with a decision made by a majority vote that leaves 40 per cent of the voters unhappy and potentially interested in undermining the decision that has been made. Consensus decision-making often gets a bad press; people see it as both very slow and meaning that everyone has to be totally happy with the decision. More accurately, the aim is to make sure that everyone's views are heard, that all options are explored so that everyone is reasonably happy with the decision. Speed is relative too; you need to compare the time you spend in coming to the decision with the time spent after a vote when you have to deal with a series of disgruntled people.

An issue that needs to be addressed in non-hierarchical organisations is that of power. Part of the aim of being non-hierarchical is to remove the power differences between people. However, as we will discuss (see Chapter 4), power comes in many forms. Individuals can be intimidating in their passion for a particular view; it can feel as if there is no space to articulate a perspective that does not fit with the espoused philosophy of the organisation. In practice, decisions may be

made between meetings by those who are confident to do so. The power of being the longest-staying worker, or the one with the most history can be significant too.

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## Case scenario

Josie was a staff member of a women's health collective. She was becoming increasingly uncomfortable about the collective's policy of not providing individual counselling for women. After many of the groups she was running, women would ask whether they could see her or someone else individually and she had to say no. The collective believed that individual counselling perpetuated women seeing their problems as individual rather than cultural and so the centre only offered group work and community education. In a meeting, she tried to express her views but felt that as usual the meeting was dominated by the women who had begun the collective, who had very strong views about how it should be run. She decided to ask that the next meeting be structured to more truly reflect a consensus decision-making approach: each worker was to put their point of view in turn without being interrupted by others, the pros and cons of the issue were to be considered, and options developed before a final decision was made. Eventually the meeting was held and it was agreed to explore the possibility of having individual sessions to complement attendance at a group.

Some of the principles and practices of a consensus decision-making, flatter structure can also be used within hierarchical and bureaucratic organisations. Within a team, for example, the team members, including the team leader, might agree to work to consensus. This may be a balancing act for the person seen by management as responsible for the work of the team. They have to make it clear to staff what can be dealt with in a consensus decision-making style, for example, and what will have to be done by the team leader. Operating in this way can have a number of advantages for both the team and the team leader. First, it can mean that there is a sense of shared decision-making, that all team members can influence how decisions are made. This reinforces to staff that their opinions are valued and is likely to create a greater sense of energy in the team. It also means for the team leader that there are more views and ideas about issues expressed and that decisions are more likely to be adhered to.

Committees of management can also work in this way, particularly in small organisations where there is a very close working relationship between the staff and the management committee. This can mean there is a blurring of roles between the committee members and the staff—are committee members to be involved in all decisions, and, if not, when should they be involved? Often the agreement is that the committee will be involved in policy and/or major decisions about such issues as overall direction or funding. In practice, it can be hard to work out what the day-to-day decisions are and what are the more major ones. Partly, these are issues of trust and mutual respect, which often are resolved with time.

## **Influence of size**

I want to finish this chapter by looking briefly at the issue of size. Often it seems that size has a major influence on organisational life. What is possible in a small organisation in terms of informal communication and shared decision-making becomes much more complex as soon as the organisation grows. Because of this, workers will often talk longingly of the early days of an organisation when it was easy for everyone to know what was happening, to feel they shared more actively, and in a more equal way, in the organisation's development and decision-making. Part of the appeal of smaller organisations is that it is easier for structures to be less hierarchical and systems less bureaucratic. As organisations get larger, it becomes harder to manage this, more formal structures develop with separate teams to manage different work areas, and communication is generally formalised.

Some people would suggest keeping organisations small and there would clearly be some benefits in this. However, this does not necessarily mean that smaller organisations always work better. If people do not agree or do not get on well together, conflict can be ever-present, as workers can not avoid each other. Sometimes sharing decisions can simply become a laborious process; particularly about nonessential issues. A small organisation can have a bureaucratically minded coordinator. Larger organisations can have some benefits in terms of choice of workers for clients, possibly offering a wider range of services, and more diversity for workers and clients. The answer may be to think about the size of organisation needed for a particular community or service, rather than to assume that one size is always better.

## Summary

In this chapter, we have explored:

- What a human service organisation is, acknowledging that while we think of human service organisations as those that focus on work with people, there is a blurring of this role with businesses.
- How to think about what distinguishes a human service organisation, which can be in terms of:
  - purpose—the overall mission or vision and how this relates to more specific goals and the implicit or explicit values expressed in these
  - technology—how the organisation carries out its work
  - auspice—the organisation’s mandate and funding, whether it is a government department, for example, or a voluntary agency auspiced by a church.
- The nature of bureaucracy and what that means for human service workers. Most human service workers work in large organisations that tend then to be bureaucratic. This usually means having a hierarchical structure with clear lines of responsibility; work is divided according to roles, carried out by trained workers whose work is controlled by rules. While we tend to think of government departments as bureaucracies, large voluntary agencies also operate in bureaucratic ways because of their size.
- Other organisational structures, such as collectives, and how these operate with their emphasis on a flatter structure, consensus decision-making, and greater sharing of roles. This approach can also sometimes be used by teams within larger, bureaucratic organisations.

## Reflective practice

Think about a human service organisation you have had contact with as a worker, student, or client.

- How did the organisation come across?
- What seemed to be its public purpose?
- What other purposes did it seem to have, and did these seem to be in conflict?
- What tools or frameworks did the staff use?
- How did they relate to and work with clients?
- How did you feel about the organisation?
- What would it be like to be a client or a worker there?

Use the following example to think about how you might respond to working in a human service organisation. Jo is a team leader in a family and children's services agency. The

agency is very large with several departments, each with more than one team. Although the agency tends to work in a bureaucratic way, Jo prefers to share decision-making wherever possible. Mostly, this works well and the team is seen as having better working relationships than many others in the agency. At present, Jo's manager is putting pressure on her to make team members finish their monthly statistics within a week of the end of the month. Jo is reluctant to bring this up with the team because she knows some people at least will think she should just say no. What issues does this raise for Jo in terms of her values and beliefs about how to work best in the organisation? How might these be similar to or different from those of her manager or her staff team? What do you think about Jo's approach? How might you react if you were Jo?