# Metalog: "What is an organisation?"

**Susanne Burgstaller**

D: Mum, what is an organisation?

M: There is no such thing.

D: What? You keep mentioning that word all the time!

M: Yes, when I talk about different organisations. You see, every organisation is different.

D: OK, but they must have something in common for you to call them by the same name.

M: Well, I guess you have a point there. Let's rephrase the question. Let us ask: "How can we describe an organisation?"

D: Alright ... And now you will probably tell me that the answer depends on whom we ask!

M: Correct. If we ask an IT person, she might say that an organisation consists of people who are connected by a company intranet and are working with the same IT tools. If we ask a lawyer, she would say it is a legal entity. If we ask a sociologist or an anthropologist, she might say that it consists of a group of people who have designed a number of rituals and rules for working together.

D: They all mention people. So can we say an organisation consists of people?

M: Yes, most people who think about organisations agree on the fact that people are a key component. But it's not just the physical presence of the people, but mainly their interactions that make up organisations.

D: What do you mean by "interactions"?

M: Interactions can be anything from a personal verbal conversation, an action, a written communication, a non-verbal sign, a picture, a mail, a text, a blog, etc. Some say

"communications" instead of interactions, meaning more or less the same thing, but we like to focus on the deed rather than the word, and therefore we prefer the word "interaction".

D: And who is "we"?

M: Solution-focused practitioners.

D: OMG, what are "solution-focused practitioners"?

M: Can we leave that for another discussion?

D: If you insist . . . So what else can you tell me about organisations?

M: Me and my colleagues would say, for example, that the most useful metaphor for an organisation is to regard it as sets of self-organising conversations.

D: Aha. And what do others say?

M: Others compare them to machines, organisms, brains, cultures, power systems, and so on.

D: So what do you think is right?

M: That's not possible to say. It only matters what is more useful.

D: So what is this conversation-metaphor useful for?

M: For making change in organisations more likely.

D: But doesn't it leave out a lot? Because I mean there are companies that refine oil and so I guess all their pipelines and machinery are very important. Or hospitals where doctors operate on patients. I mean, they need to do more than just talk to one another, don't they?

M: Yes, sure. But the primary tool for effecting anything in an organisation is conversation. If you want coordinated action you need to get people to talk to one another, and the better the conversations, the better the results.

D: So we can safely ignore all the other things.

M: Not quite. As consultants we must make sure that these "other things" can enter the conversation any time and preferably in the right way.

D: That must be hard. You don't know anything about operations or pipelines . . .

M: No, but my customers do, and I need to know enough to help them talk about them in a useful way.

D: Hm. I have heard people complain a lot that things are not organised so well in their work place. Why don't they do something about it?

M: They could, if they all got their act together. You always complain about school. Why don't you do something about that?

D: But I am just a student! There are the teachers, and then the director, and then the school board, and then the ministry of education . . . what can we do against them?

M: That's what employees say also. They underestimate the power of vision and of concerted and coordinated action. They focus on the complicated rules that people in the organisation have made up. Things like hierarchy, structure, functions, processes, decision-making, etc. etc. We don't like to focus too much on that.

D: Why not?

M: Because talking and thinking about them only strengthens them. Usually we have been called into an organisation to loosen them and effect some change. And since these complicated sets of rules have been made up by the people themselves in the first place, they can usually also change most of them, even if it is laborious and might take some time. But they tend to forget that and just submit to them.

D: And you want to remind them?

M: Sure, since that's a way of helping people change their way of working together, and that can only benefit all of us, if we have better hospitals or oil refineries.

D: So how do you do that: "change things"?

M: Well, I personally don't change anything in the organisations. My customers do that. I see myself more like an enzyme that facilitates that change.

D: How do you do that?

M: Well, little changes happen all the time. So I try to help my customers spot the useful changes and build on them.

D: And what if they can't find anything?

M: Usually they find something if I help them to observe differently, with more attention to what is going well rather than what is a problem.

D: But you analyse the problems?

M: We do not need to analyse a problem to come to a solution.

D: That makes sense.

M: It really surprises me you saying that! Mostly people say that it's counterintuitive.

D: I don't think so. It's just like the other day when we were really stuck with our biology project, ready to fall out with each other. Then I asked: "Let's imagine we had to start from scratch. How would we do it?" After we had discussed that we knew how to carry on, and no more bitching about it.

M: Hey, that is "natural solution-focus" for you!

D: Is it? Cool. And what do other kinds of people think about organisations?

M: The more technically-minded ones like to study what successful organisations do. From that they devise best-practice models and tell their customers what they think they should do.

D: I don't think I would like that.

M: Well, it can have some merits, for example if an organisations is new at something. Then it can be useful to learn the basics from someone else who is good at it. But I believe that every organisation needs to always think for itself and be ready to adapt to its own special situation.

D: I guess so. And what else?

M: Systemic people like to study generalised theories about how organisations work and learn from that. They sound far more theoretical than we do. But generally they also work along with the organisations towards their goals, like we do, except in a slightly more complicated way.

D: And what do you think about that?

M: I find that studying, say, sociological observations or theories about how organisations function exercises a mental muscle. That can be very useful practice, as long as you don't mistake these observations for reality. They are the map, not the territory. In fact, they are even further removed: a map for reading the map, more like. But it trains your perception and awareness of organisations, and makes you more responsive as a consultant.

D: Like impro training?

M: Yes, much like that. As you know, you cannot script everything. And the more you train your awareness, the better. But we rarely use these theories directly, maybe in 2–5% of the situations, and only when we find they produce a useful effect. By the way, impro is also very good training for us consultants.

D: See, I told you that my impro group was a good thing! So is my impro group also an organisation?

M: What do you usually do together?

D: We play impro, and afterwards we go and have some bubble tea.

M: Then I would say it is a group.

D: Hm. When would we be an organisation?

M: Maybe if you worked together in a more organised form and for a longer time on a common project?

D: Aha, so structure, time, and a common project are required? I want to work for an organisation that has good common projects!

M: Sure you do. Most people do!

D: And the difference between an organisation and a family? I mean in our family we also have interaction, and rules, and common projects, and we are people … – and even pay – our pocket money! So are we an organisation?

M: No, and your pocket money is hardly your pay for being a daughter! I guess the difference is the question of membership. Once you are a family member, you are always a family member. I cannot sack you, and you cannot sack me. Even if you never speak to you me again in the whole of your life, you will always be my daughter.

D: Then how can you tell when are you a member of an organisation?

M: Usually when you get a work contract, or a part in a common project. If we look at virtual, voluntary, network, or cluster organisations, for example, the question of membership is quite tenuous. But usually people can say reasonably clearly whether they belong or do not belong to an organisation. Somehow this frontier or threshold

between the inside and the outside of an organisation is an important distinction.

D: How is it important?

M: Well, if we assume that organisations are essentially self-organising, autopoetic systems, then all the inner order or structure is created internally. However, most people would agree that the outside has an impact on what is going on inside, or it should have if an organisation wants to survive in the long term!

D: And what is there outside an organisation?

M: Other organisations! Some call it "markets", some call it "society". However you name it: in order for an organisation to survive within its environment, people must watch what is going on around it. They must watch what their customers want, what their competitors are doing, what relevant laws and regulations are being passed, and so on. They must even be aware of what their employees want.

D: But employees are inside the organisation.

M: They can be regarded as both inside and outside the organisation. In one way they are the organisations most essential asset as well as the most relevant environment.

D: How come?

M: Well, people are not simply work machines with relevant skills to do the tasks. Their hopes and dreams for what they want also matter. They want to realise their hopes and dreams not only in their family and private lives, but also through their work. So they judge the goals of the organisation and its ways of operating. And if they consider it not good enough, they will quit. Either physically, by getting another job, or by inner emigration, by working a little less committedly. That can make a huge difference for the survival and success of an organisation.

D: Yes, I understand that: I would quit too if I did not like my organisation. And are you part of an organisation when you are working for a customer?

M: Well that is a tricky question. Yes and no. I interact and cooperate with my customers, sometimes very closely, in an agreed setting, and in that way you could say that I

become part of their system for a temporary period, or that we form a special subset of a system formed for the purpose of consulting. Personally, I see my role as that of a supplier, not a member, and as such I am a relevant partner in their environment or context.

D: And a supplier is outside, a member is inside.

M: That depends.

D: I knew you would say that! What on?

M: Where you as an observer draw the boundaries of the organisation. Commonly, the boundary is quite narrowly drawn around the employees who have a regular work contract with the organisation. But some people also include employees who are leased to the organisation, or people who work on commission to sell the organisation's goods, or suppliers who provide a service, like me, or component parts of the organisation's goods, like car parts for example. How you are regarded usually determines how you are treated by the organisation: more as a vendor in the first instance, or more as a partner in the second.

D: And where do you draw it?

M: At different places depending on what needs to be achieved. If an organisation is asking itself: "How can we optimise the efficiency of our production process?" then a narrow boundary is useful. When they try to determine: "How can we excel in the market in the future?" then they need a wide perspective and to look broadly at their whole environment or context, to all sorts of parties interacting with them – customers, suppliers, regulators, competitors, partners. I think these seemingly contradictory perspectives both hold some truth and definitely have practical merits in consulting.

D: Seems like this inside-outside issue is important, but a little bit fuzzy, hm?

M: Well, I guess it all comes down to the question of whether the environment of an organisation is considered to be a relevant part of the organisation or not. I think it is. I mean would I still be a consultant if I had nobody to consult? Would a parliament still be a parliament if there were no

political parties or no voters? Would a hospital still be a hospital without patients?

D: I think not. That would make no sense. But where does this environment end?

M: That is really hard to say, because in a complex system everything is connected. You could say it ends where the interaction ends, without really knowing where that is. In some instances it seems reasonably clear-cut: Take my customer-organisations. It is clear that we are rather closely connected, we may even be observed to cooperate within the frame of a special "consulting system". In any case we constitute a relevant environment for each other since there is a mutual impact one on the other – economic, social, physical, etc. But then there are many other organisations in the market who are not my customers. However, their potential needs are still relevant for me because they may some day become my customers. So when I design my website, which can be considered to be the "outer layer" of my company, I try to bear also their potential interests and needs in mind. The better I manage to do this, the more my company will thrive.

D: So can I imagine an organisation like an onion with many layers?

M: If you imagine it still in the soil, then yes. Another image could be that of a cell with many neighbouring cells and a constant flow of substances going in and out of it.

D: Aha. But Mum, why are there so many rules in organisations?

M: Rules lend reliability and stability. Imagine if everything were to always run differently, you would never know what to expect. Customers would not like it. Imagine if you went on Google and could never know which way it would work.

D: That would be a real nuisance!

M: And inside the organisation it is similar. People just like to know what to expect. It's their expectations, and the fact that others expect them to expect certain things that often determines the way people behave.

D: But you said they could do it differently any time.

M: Indeed. And they do in little ways all the time without even being aware of it. The longer they keep doing something in a certain way, the more fixed it seems to them. If things go badly they can get onto a one-way path to failure. And it is hard to pinpoint exactly which rule needs changing to produce a desired result because everything is connected.

D: And what sorts of rules are there in organisations?

M: Oh, all kinds. There are rules imposed by the outside, such as laws or compliance rules that the organisation has to obey, or suffer the consequences if they are found out. However, also those rules are man-made. They are not at the same level as the law of gravity, which applies everywhere. Then there are usually some formal internal rules about how to do the business, and some other informal rules, which people carry about in their heads. Strangely enough the latter can sometimes be the most difficult ones to change.

D: All that "complicatedness" of organisations . . . How do you deal with it?

M: That's a really tricky issue. On the one hand it is important to be in sync with the customers regarding the demands of their context and being able to use their language in order to have a good interface with them. On the other hand we need to try to keep things as simple as possible, because the answer to complexity is not more complexity, you know. That can be the hardest part of the work. Staying simple and open-minded, not trying to impress or get sucked into their way of thinking.

D: And what about decisions? Dad said recently that his boss had decided that he should do something in a certain way, and there was nothing he could do about it.

M: Yes, that often happens. There is a basic understanding when you sign a work contract with an organisation that you accept your bosses' decisions.

D: Sounds like being in the army.

M: Well, it's not that strict. Some people even feel that it is comfortable not to have to think for yourself. But I believe it can be quite dangerous.

D: Yes, what if the bosses are wrong or if you disagree?

M: Exactly. But you always have many choices: you can argue with them, ignore them, or do it your own way all the same.

D: And if none of that works?

M: I guess then you have to decide to either give in, or leave the company. Otherwise, you have a miserable work-life and moan about everything all day. Lots of people do that, because they don't want to miss out on good money and can't be bothered to take the trouble to do something different.

D: I would not want to stay and moan all day! But who gives the bosses the power?

M: All the people within the company. They give them the power by following them.

D: So if everyone said: "No, we won't do this" then the bosses would have no power.

M: Indeed.

D: So why don't people do it more often?

M: Unfortunately, that option is one that also gets forgotten a lot.

D: Mum, I want to work for a good boss.

M: Sure. How could you tell that you have a good boss?

D: I would like her to be active and know what she wants and what we should be heading for. But I don't want her to force me to do things, but rather to invite me and help me along to join in. And I want her to listen to me, and protect me when things threaten to go wrong.

M: Maybe you will need to be a boss, too, at some point.

D: Yes, maybe. But you know what? I am really glad I am not in an organisation yet.

M: But you are! You're at school.

D: Oh, yes. But there I am the customer, and you always say that the customer is the expert!

M: Yes, exactly. – So how about some maths revision now?

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