# INTRODUCTION TO OPEN ORGANIZATIONS

'Open Organizations' is the current name for a framework for a functional organizational structure that people can choose to adopt in part or whole when working together. It can also be used to as a tool to analyse other organizations. Open Organizations is in a large part the result of observing and distilling the patterns, or processes, in the functioning of existing organizations. It is developing according to the understanding that theory and practice rely on each other. Core values that this frameworks attempts to embody, and possible formal agreement on those, is being discussed at our openorg-dev mailing list.

**An Open Organization is created by carrying out certain defined processes. This is its strength:**

- processes are functional: people must carry them out continuously, (there are never 'fixed' states). An Open Organization is thereby a self-organizing system
- because they are functional, processes and their effects can be measured
- processes are a necessary way to understand organizations in the light of the scientific knowledge we have today of our world.

**Terms**

- Politics on any scale means essentially the deliberate organization of interactions between people. Whenever people form a group and deliberately organize their interactions in a certain way it is a political decision.
    - Interactions (relationships) between people are active exchanges, not static. That is, they are processes.
        - So politics is actually the subject of choices about processes.

For example, voting is a process that people carry out. Another example is provided by the question that is sometimes asked, "If we don't like capitalism, what can we replace it with?" The question is based on an error - because capitalism is a set of processes that people continuously carry out.

- When people deliberately organize their work together, the processes (tasks) they continually carry out create and maintain their organization. So the term 'organizational structure' refers to a dynamic system, not a static one.
- When processes are deliberately selected by people forming an organization, they are chosen on the basis that they make certain preferred outcomes more probable. These outcomes include both internal ones - for the organization itself, and external ones - for the organization's outward effects.

o The outcomes are aimed for because they are valued; the values given to these outcomes are political values.

So far we have identified four regular processes (and a fifth extraordinary process) for all working groups, a set of regular ongoing task-processes for **Inter-Working Groups**, and eight functional rules for an Open Organization.

## Processes

### 1) Decision-making

Within each working group, decisions are made by rough consensus. This takes place *whilst* tasks are being worked on and carried out. Otherwise those tasks might never begin or progress. Tasks are adjusted, adapted, expanded and contracted by rough consensus, but they are not interrupted or stopped by decision making about them, they are always ongoing.

Different levels of formality and complexity are possible, but the essence of consensus is that anyone can make a proposal, and anyone can veto any proposal. Silence means assent - if nobody vetoes a proposal or decision then it goes ahead. A proposal or decision can only be stopped by an objection that it would contradict an Open Organization **process** and/or **functional rule** and/or that it would endanger the existence of some part or the whole organization.

- **A proposal must have a certain time period defined for decision about it from the beginning. The proposed task must define measurable goals, a time frame for completion (or progress if it is to be continuous), and a notice period that will be given if it is discontinued.**

### 2) Accountability

Your working group regularly searches for (possible) effects of its actions on other groups. It adapts its work to prevent adverse effects on others. If your group is told about an adverse effect of its actions on others, your group reacts as if it found the effect. When groups communicate about this, the group that is affected decides what is adverse to it. This makes your group, by choice, accountable to others.

More generally, accountability means that those who are affected by a decision can participate in making that decision. It sets limits to **self-management** by allowing others who are affected by a project to overrule those who are working on it, and even to cancel the project if a major problem arises. An adverse effect of your group's work might also be when others depend on the success of your work. Conflicts can often be avoided if people are aware of the potential consequences of their own work.

### 3) Transparency

Your working group regularly publishes, in a readily accessible form, summaries of the work you are doing and of the knowledge gained from that

work. This is part of the **public ownership of knowledge.**
This allows others to recognize interdependencies between you and other groups because they can see what you are doing. People can identify possible consequences of your work (even during its planning stages) and hold your group accountable for its work. Also, you need to know what other groups are doing so that you can understand how their work relates to what you are doing. In the process of accountability, it might be necessary for one group to intervene in the decision-making processes of another group. To do this effectively, it must first understand the work they've done so far and the discussions currently taking place, as well as relevant lessons learned from previous issues. For these reasons, **transparency** is necessary for **accountability**.

**4) Coordinating**

This task needs to be carried out in each working group. The key tasks are: keeping track of what work is being done by whom, keeping track of any active proposals, and writing regular summaries of what work has been done and why, and of the main discussions taking place. Coordinating work can be done by one person or be shared in different ways within the working group.

**5) Excluding**

This is an extraordinary process. If an individual or a whole group repeatedly does not fulfil commitments, the other members of the group or the organization as a whole can exclude that person or group from current tasks.

If a working group seems to be breaking its charter or that of the organization, or if an unforseen problem arises, a process must be formulated and carried out by the organization for examining the issue and resolving the problem. This could result in modification of the group's charter, and possibly even of the organization's charter. The organization can also decide to dissolve the group, or suspend its activities until the problem is resolved. However, in the main, as long as there are no complaints, each working group remains **self-managing**.

**6) Inter-Working Group (IWG) processes**

IWGs are needed because both the mass of information generated by Working Groups (WGs) in a large organization, and the complexity of the interdependencies, will be enourmous. IWGs:

1) Technically/practicably facilitate WG tasks.
2) Facilitate inter-WG communication and cooperation - routing (and organize) informational 'traffic' as needed and/or requested by WGs.
3) Monitor tasks of WGs; facilitate and maintain agreements between them - providing support for keeping collaboration within the scope that WGs initially agreed on.
4) Facilitate breach of agreement complaints resolution and other process-related problems when they occur. Also generally look to uncover and analyse

patterns of interactions throughout the organization, identify potential problems and ways that processes can be improved; assist WGs making and carrying out proposals to make those improvements.

5) (Technically) facilitate decision making between WGs when requested. IWGs are formed on the same basis as any other WG. In addition, in order not to create patterns of power between IWGs and WGs, it is mandatory that all members of IWGs:

a) have past working experience and are current working members of a minimum of one non-Inter WG

b) maintain a defined ratio that applies equally to all IWGs, of IWG work to WG implementation work. A minimun of 1/3 of total working time in non-Inter WG's is the recommended lower limit of this ratio.

**Eight functional rules**

### 1) Charter

An Open Organization must have a published written charter which sets out how it choses to implement, given its particular circumstances, the processes (and therefore values) which make it an Open Organization. Within the organization, people form Working Groups to take on particular tasks. Each working group must also have a written published charter which must be compatible with the organization's charter. It must define the working group's methods of implementation and measurable goals for its chosen task(s). It must be approved by the organization as a whole.

### 2) Open participation

Anyone can work in the organization if they agree to the organization's charter and have the necessary skills. This means that full advantage is gained from people's available skills and enthusiasm.

Open participation is based on the 'trust first' principle: the underlying premise that people are sociable and want to contribute to society, and should therefore be trusted to do what they undertake to do, knowing that they are accountable for what they do. The 'trust first' attitude is always maintained and calibrated to the circumstances. For example, implementation work may be shared between a number of people when a task is so important that error or wrongdoing might jeopardize the organization. This group of people can consist of experts (see **Respect for skill** below) and/or peers. Approaches other than 'trust first' are likely to be needed when computer passwords, potentially dangerous tools, etc. are being used.

### 3) Self-management

The people in an organization within the working groups, who do or will contribute to *implementation work* on the different tasks, decide amongst themselves how, what work is to be done in their **decision-making**
In this way, work is guided and done by those who know it best. It also means that those doing the work, who are immediately affected by working practices, are able to decide on those practices themselves.

- **Implementation work is defined as the various steps taken after the design stage (discussion, advice, consultation) involved in the production or maintaining of a task. Making a summary of a discussion about a task from the design stage that enables the implementation of a task to begin is also implementation work.**

## 4) Best practices

Life is a very functional business: if a job is worth doing, it is worth doing well. For any particular task, there is usually only a handful of commonly recognized best practices and people with expertise in that task will probably be familiar with all of them (but see **diversity**) It is easier to seek out best practices if there is **public ownership of knowledge**.

## 5) Respect for skill

One kind of knowledge can be gained, for example, by reading a book, or a transcript of a discussion. Another kind, which is usually called 'expertise', 'experience' or 'skill' in a certain activity, must be acquired by working with someone who already has this expertise. To benefit from expertise, we have to first acknowledge it in those who have it and give proportional attention and weight to their views in decision-making.
By doing this we release the full power of everyone's abilities rather than adopting a superficial notion of equality. We grant skilled people a type of power, in proportion to their knowledge, (rather than giving them the right to dominate us or others). Respecting skill not only allows a group to function and solve problems better and more quickly, it also allows those with expertise to teach others by example. Thus, their knowledge is passed on, and can be publicly owned as well.

## 6) Public ownership of knowledge

The knowledge produced by an organization, including its internal debates and the lessons learnt from them, must be recorded and maintained in publicly accessible archives, so that people inside and outside the organization, and in future generations, can benefit from it. This history should also be organized and presented in a way that minimises the difficulty of learning from it. This allows knowledge to circulate where it is needed, providing the maximum benefit to the organization and to society. The result is public ownership of knowledge. Both **respect for skill** and **public ownership of knowledge** require **transparency**.

## 7) Diversity

Different approaches to carrying out tasks and solving problems can coexist (without hindering one another), and learn from each other. There can be cooperation and collaboration *between different working practices*. Diversity increases the probability of success in reaching goals and of the discovery of new working practices. Diversity also allows us to challenge and improve the **best practices** in any speciality.

**8) Affirmative terms**

The use of only affirmative (positive) terms in describing both goals and ways of working. Defining always what an Open Organization and its Working Groups are for.
Otherwise terms such as 'non-hierarchical' and 'destroying' might be used to define organization and work. The first term is practicably useless and meaningless, as it is impossible to build positive, creative structures and practices, based on the conceptual idea of the negating of a structure. Furthermore, despite the opposite intention of the term 'non-hierarchical', the concept of 'hierarchy' is conceptually entrenched by repeatedly referring to it - even in a negated form. The second term, 'destroying' could not lead to work that furthers the organization's **charter**.

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-- [RichardMalter](#), [BenjaminGeer](#), [ToniPrug](#)