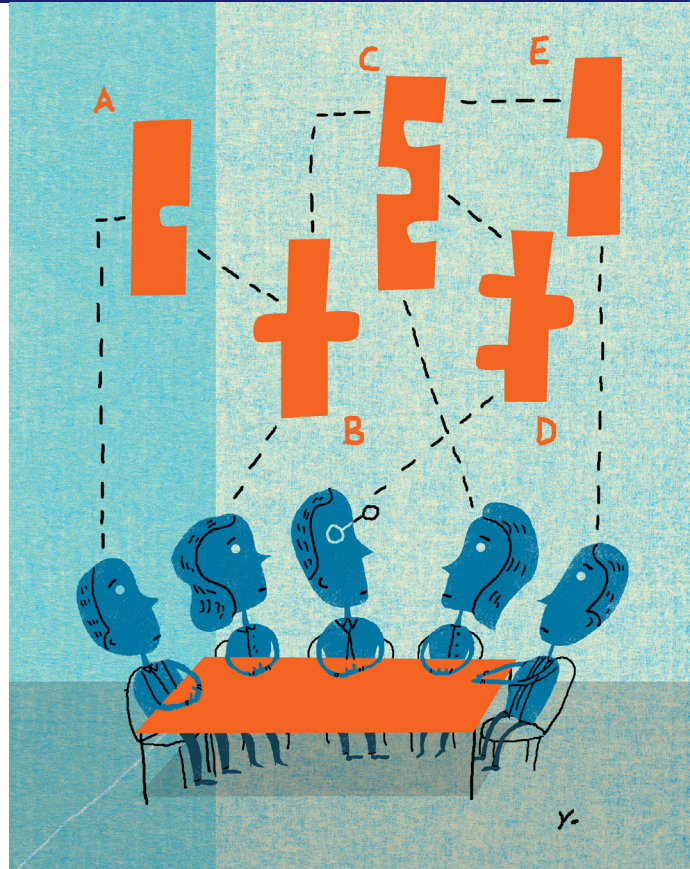




Flat, Egalitarian Structure: Working with Energy

Carol Pierce



INTRODUCTION

“Where’s the energy?!” is a common expression of frustration from OD consultants. Almost every one of us has sat with a group which is out of options, in endless discussion and making no progress. “Go with the energy” is another - advice for when you do not know what to do. When energy is referred to in such ways, assumptions about the meaning and the use of the word ‘energy’ have been limited to feeling-intensity or lack of it. The focus is on how energy feels (which is understandable) not the nature, sources, or impact of it that these sayings call for.

Listening to leading theorists at the 2010 NTL conference on The New OD project new directions for OD theory, two themes emerged for me which have implications for wanting to understand how energy is maintained and worked with in groups and systems. Those themes are:

- the ability to respond and manage energy in the moment
- the need for a quick response to change in the environment - ‘reading energy’

Developing and managing movement toward flatter, egalitarian work styles and structure addresses these themes. Flat, egalitarian structure generates and loosens energy. Energy is something more than what members bring to groups and systems. It is also inherent in certain structures. When the dynamics of egalitarian structure are known and honored, energy structure is present and creative. This article illustrates the relationship between flat, equalitarian structure and the impact of the phenomena of energy release in such structures.

The Theory of Working with Energy

Flat structure theory or Power Equity Group (PEG) theory (Pierce, 2011) provides a framework and images for working with energy and holding a space or a container for ‘work’, such as in self-managing teams. As energy theory, it describes the nature and impact of the loosened energy of egalitarian structure.

The trend over the last thirty years or more is toward the use of flatter, less hierarchical structure in many workplaces. Good teamwork brings visions of working together, energized and creative; everyone’s resources are essential and valued. Members with their differing styles of work and leadership are sources of energy. The other major genesis of energy is the group as an entity itself, separate from members. It is a source of influence that needs to be taken into account. Differentiating the group from members as initiators of energy often makes the difference as to how well members work together in loosened egalitarian energy.



Questions to consider are:

- Why is egalitarian structure associated with creating or releasing energy?
- Is such structure used with insight as to why or how creative energy, collaborative work styles, and emergent leadership come about; or is it used as just a 'good idea'?

A Continuum of Structure and Energy

Insight into the relationship between the nature of energy and where it is held, with structure and the emergence of energy phenomena can be found by placing Flat Structure on a continuum with Facilitative Structure (eg a training group) and Hierarchical Structure (eg a corporation) - see Figure 1.

Flat Structure	Facilitative Structure	Hierarchical Structure
free, loose energy	energy held by a facilitator	energy held by structure

Figure 1: A Continuum of Structure and Energy

In PEG theory the flatter the structure, the more loose energy is present and magnified by the action of the group. Figure 2 illustrates a flat structure of group energy.

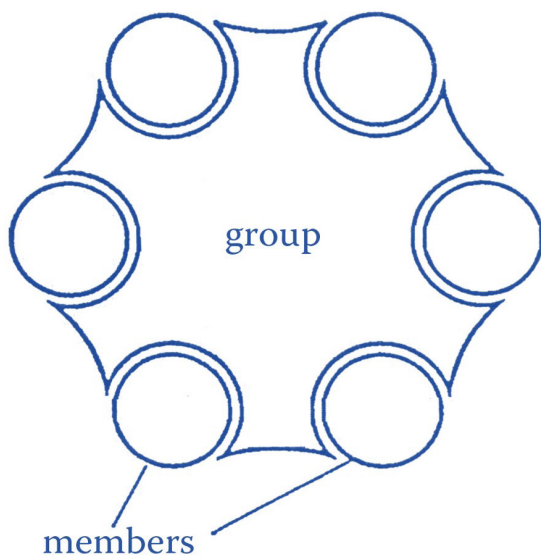


Figure 2: Flat Energy-Structure

In Figure 2 circles represent members. The inner pattern that partially surrounds each member is energy, called the group. The group is shown as an entity in its own right. Energy, separate from members, has been released and becomes the group. Members are not the group and the group is not the members. The terms energy, group, and group energy are synonymous here. (The language we use needs to differentiate clearly between the group and

its members.)

Power equity is present because members have equal access to group energy. 'Access' is the key concept here. Access guarantees inclusivity, justice, and empowerment. Figure 2 shows that the primary contact boundary is between the member and the group, not between the member and other members. This is a vital piece of both information and theory that we need to understand when we are consulting and working with egalitarian teams. An important task for the consultant is to assure that members have access to the group. Free loose energy that engages members is a source of creativity. The group exists as an entity with which members and consultant partner to manage and develop power equity.

Two important questions for consultants now arise and require answers:

- Who is the client? Both members and the group as an entity must be considered as clients.
- What are the implications for members when group energy engages them while their focus is on that which is visually seen ie other members? (Members have visual reality that calls attention to other members in a way that group energy cannot.) Many misplaced assumptions or projections emerge because of this, the most important of which is to confuse group energy engagement with the action of another member.

Much of what we do as consultants is affected by the growing centrality of energy as hierarchy lessens and egalitarian structure increases. Images of Facilitative and Hierarchical Structure may help us to understand the nature of the energy that is caught up in these more delineated structures.

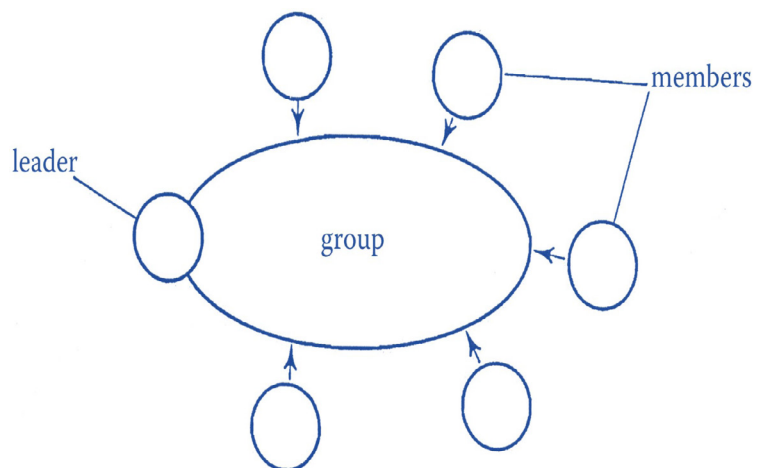


Figure 3: Facilitative-Structure from an Energy Perspective

Figure 3 shows Facilitative Structure. The leader holds group energy loosely but steadily by creating a container with his or her value system, integrity and ground rules. The leader brings safety for members by carrying responsibility and accountability for members and the



group, enabling members to have access to group energy. Members interact directly with the group (as well as with members) while working on process and content tasks.

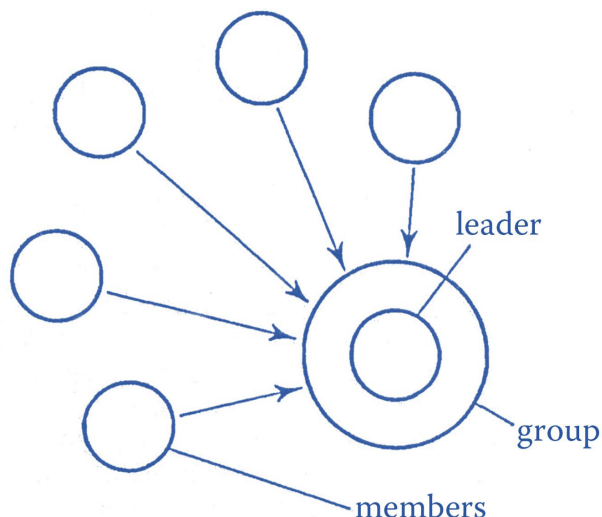


Figure 4: Hierarchical-Structure from an Energy Perspective

Figure 4 illustrates Hierarchical Structure in terms of how group energy is held in PEG theory. The group and leader are one unless she or he holds group energy more freely by choice. Traditionally, a container of hierarchy is visualized as a pyramid with roles and leadership delineating structure. Members' attention and access to group energy is through the leader. Group energy can be held so tightly that it is synonymous with the leader and unavailable to members. There is no engagement or access to the group. Members are their own main source of energy. The leader has and holds group energy, apportioning it as he or she wishes.

Group Energy as a Container

Though we may never find a totally flat group in hierarchical organizations, more and more groups and teams work in egalitarian ways within them. PEG theory gives insight into flat-structure dynamics of which facilitative methods and hierarchical experience are unobservant. The language of containers and boundaries grow in importance the flatter the structure. In facilitative methods and hierarchical experience we are used to working in a container held by a leader who either sets boundaries or negotiates them so they are clear. In the power equity of egalitarian structure the container and boundaries are more fluid. By visualizing where group energy is, we can determine the nature of the container of which we are a part or with which we are consulting. In flat structure, the group sets and forms the container. The container is the group and the group is the container (although to trust that there even is a container, without the familiar experience of a leader defining and holding it, is challenging).

The consultant and members partner with group energy to enliven it. Consulting to a flat structure calls for the consultant to hold several positions or roles simultaneously, such as observer of the group, partner with the group, portrayer of group energy, and instructor of theory that gives meaning to the experience of loose group energy. The consultant gives life and meaning to the group by sharing appropriate assumptions about its impact on members, and images to help visualize group energy. The consultant's primary commitment and concern, as he or she performs the above-mentioned roles, is the health of the group as an entity. Some ways members partner to enliven the group-as-container are by recognizing when group energy engages them; paying attention to the process; acknowledging the meaning of one's own behavior and assumptions made about others' behavior and events; describing the impact of others' behavior on themselves and the group; and reporting their experience of access to the group.

Group energy in egalitarian structure is sustained by values-in-action of equity, justice, inclusion, mutual empowerment, access to the group, and caring for the group. In the Facilitative Leader Group the leader sets the container for work and holds values in agreement with the participants. The container of Hierarchy is set in known structure, and values are set by the nature of the structure embedded in roles and responsibilities of managers.

In the flattened structure of power equity, responsibility for the container is shared equally among members for the health and vibrancy of group energy. The concept that members are responsible for their own comfort and safety can be a transformative experience because of the need to develop skills to take care of ourselves in a fluid container. Developing such skill in loose group energy does not come easily. We are moving away from either dependency on a leader (consciously or unconsciously) or control that comes with leadership, to the integrated self-responsible person that power equity asks us to be. We are mostly used to a leader assuming significant responsibility for our well-being. To take care of ourselves, while acting on values of power equity is new and more complicated than we expect. This is especially true, for instance, when dealing with the effects of unconscious culturally-identified dominant behavior that impairs others' access to group energy.

The concept of equal access to group energy is not part of traditional group training. It is only as the group becomes a separate entity based on the values of inclusion, justice, and mutual empowerment that clarity grows for the need for equal access to group energy. It becomes a central desire and basis for understanding behavior in groups. To have access to group energy gives us equity, acknowledges our humanity, defines who we are in a multitude of ways, stirs creativity, puts us on a journey with energy found beyond humanness, and gives us reason for being.



Characteristics of Power Equity Group Experience

Some principles or characteristics of group dynamics found in egalitarian structure as defined by power equity group theory can now be identified. They are the basis for understanding the nature of what we respond to in the loosened energy of equity.

- Resistance is central in flattened structure. Two boundaries intersect: the members' boundaries and the group's boundary as shown in Figure 2. Boundaries create resistance that gives identity. Resistance is perceived as natural, bringing understanding and clarity.
- In equity everything is data. To neither form judgment nor allow another's judgment to have an impact ensures that experience is based in data. Who can justify the claim that they know the meaning of so personal an event as group energy engaging with others?
- Who we are as an individual becomes enlarged. Personal characteristics (such as being quiet, talkative, a helper or angry, or being able to hold centrality) become 'more so' as a result of interacting directly with group energy. Heightening awareness of our effect on the group and other members is the group's way of helping us to know ourselves and our impact more clearly.
- An underlying assumption is that we are on a learning journey in a milieu of group energy. Our acquired assumptions from familiarity with hierarchy and experiencing facilitation is that personal growth comes from such things as role models, feedback, mentoring, reading, and listening to others. How we learn is expanded in power equity. Much learning comes from engagement with loose group energy that is not tied up in role authority.
- Members' diversity blossoms into full bloom. Whoever we are is set free in the expectation that we can now be ourselves as we sit in equity, valuing justice, mutual empowerment, and inclusiveness. Any exclusive, dominant or subordinated behavior that is present becomes apparent and untenable for the group, as well as for members.
- The action of loose, fluid movement of group energy may make us relive intense, old, unresolved emotion from long ago. We confuse such emotion from distressing experiences in other groups (such as family, educational, spiritual, and work-life groups) with the loose energy that is present in a structure that is flatter than the skills we have for sustaining ourselves within it. In these instances, the group as an entity, would have us move forward on a journey of resolution, attending to the impact of this unresolved emotion from the past.
- We are partners working with group energy, not passive recipients. We share responsibility for the work, such as agreed-upon purposes and goals, and for feeling safe in our loosened group energy.

- Flat structure supports emergent leadership. Group energy and the resources we bring to it are called forth as needed. Each member's time comes for leadership.

Such characteristics of flat structure may seem fascinating and interesting, or the reason not to bother with it, to just stay with what is known. The goal in understanding such structure is not necessarily to use egalitarian structure in all that we do. Rather, it is to be aware of the concept and reality of energy in order to recognize it as part of consulting work in all group settings.

Where We Start From: Hierarchy or Equity

The field of organization development came into being to attempt to ameliorate issues common to hierarchical organizational structure. Subsequently, our visions of system and group work reflect assumptions about using less hierarchy to make our organizations more responsive and creative. In doing this we are looking from right to left on the Figure 1 Continuum of Groups for insight into making systems work - moving from hierarchy to less hierarchy. Our language and thought call attention to using less hierarchy as helpful to our work. This has given us much fruitful theory and interventions.

As we move from left to right on the Continuum, the experience of flattened structure provides another viewpoint to bring to systems and group work based in the thought and language of equity. The framework of power equity assumes that equity is the innate desire of humankind, and that thoughts of structure grow from this desire. Hierarchy will always be with us because of the complexity of bringing large numbers of people together, but it may not be the 'ground' or norm for determining how people relate to each other and what is ethical behavior. PEG theory focuses on context and impact, networks of relationships, and the energy we are embedded in. When equity is the desire and 'ground' for creating ethical structure, we create and add structure from a foundation of egalitarian values.

Starting from hierarchy our focus for change addresses such things as individual leadership, power, and authority—all important. Starting with flat structure, our focus is emergent shared leadership, justice, inclusiveness, empowerment, and access to group energy—all also important. By immersing ourselves in power equity we expand our viewpoints for what we perceive and address in organizational change. As Einstein has said, "No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it." Power equity group theory brings a consciousness outside of the systems we work to change.

Learning about Experiential Phenomenon

The difficulty in learning about and working with energy theory is that it is an experiential phenomenon, best understood by personally experiencing loosened energy (such as in an NTL Shared Leadership: Power Equity Laboratory), rather than expecting insight gained from the



written word. Of course, there are some who have always experienced life through 'energy fields' and who may have developed insights into characteristics of power equity by simply reading about them, relating them to their own normal energy-filled daily experience. In these instances, PEG theory illuminates their experience of groups and relationships, acknowledging and naming what is known intuitively. Those who have worked with self-organizing systems theory may also acknowledge a sense of energy that is basic to human experience in systems. However, immersion in a power equity group experience gives deep and unmitigated feelings and insight into what the theory brings to group work. For most of us, experiential theory relies on experiential learning.

The Consultant Skill Set

Consultant skill sets need to include the ability to recognize characteristics and behavior found in the flat structure of client organizations and groups, and the ability to support the growth and creativity of such groups (rather than unknowingly moving them to unneeded hierarchy) through designs and interventions. There are innumerable skills already a part of OD training that facilitate flat-structure work. Others develop through personal work in power equity contexts, enabling consultants to bring insight through their direct experience. As an example, one of the most important skills for working with flat structure is the ability to expand one's use-of-self skills to facilitate imaging group energy. Knowing how to enable, or hold, the group-as-container for a brief time springs group energy loose to engage with participants - no small accomplishment!

In Conclusion

As a result of the dynamics and principles of flat, egalitarian structure, we need to choose carefully how flat we want structure to be. Two ways power equity group theory facilitates such choices is by enabling us to:

- sense how loose or firm energy needs to be held for the work that needs to be done, and
- identify appropriate designs or interventions according to the capacity of members to work comfortably with loosened energy.

The goal is to create a container in which energy is as loose as reasonably possible in order to release the greatest creativity for individual initiative and work in teams. All who seek to accomplish tasks and to influence others will find this theory which supports releasing and working with energy, enhancing of their work.

BIOGRAPHY

Carol Pierce is an organization development consultant specializing in process consultation and the development of diversity programs. As an innovator in the field of diversity education, Ms. Pierce is a developer of many widely-used models for gender, multicultural, and sexual orientation diversity work. She is a creator of the Power Equity Group Theory - a model for understanding and maintaining flatter, more egalitarian structures that enhance creativity and acknowledge the full range of diversity among its members. She is a founder of the Power Equity Training Group.

Ms. Pierce is the author of *The Power Equity Group: A Guide for Understanding Equity and Acknowledging Diversity*; and a co-author of *A Male/Female Continuum: Paths to Collegueship; Sexual Orientation and Identity: Heterosexual, Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Journeys*; and the forthcoming book *Journeys of Race and Culture: Paths to Valuing Diversity*. She is the publisher of newdynamics Publications.

Ms. Pierce is a member of the NTL Institute of Applied Behavioral Science. She is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin School of Music, and among her varied organization development training experiences is a graduate of the Organization and Systems Development program of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. She has served in the New Hampshire state legislature and chaired the New Hampshire Commission on the Status of Women from 1970 to 1975. She lives in Laconia, New Hampshire.

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