## You saw it here first!

Julie Hay has been updating her material about the metaphor she uses to describe an organisation, partly in order to include it in one of the workbooks that she provides to participants on her workshops and webinars, partly in advance of writing a book about TA for consultants, and partly because she is expecting to refer to the model when she submits her DProf thesis about the dynamics of professional associations.

Sailship Success – an update

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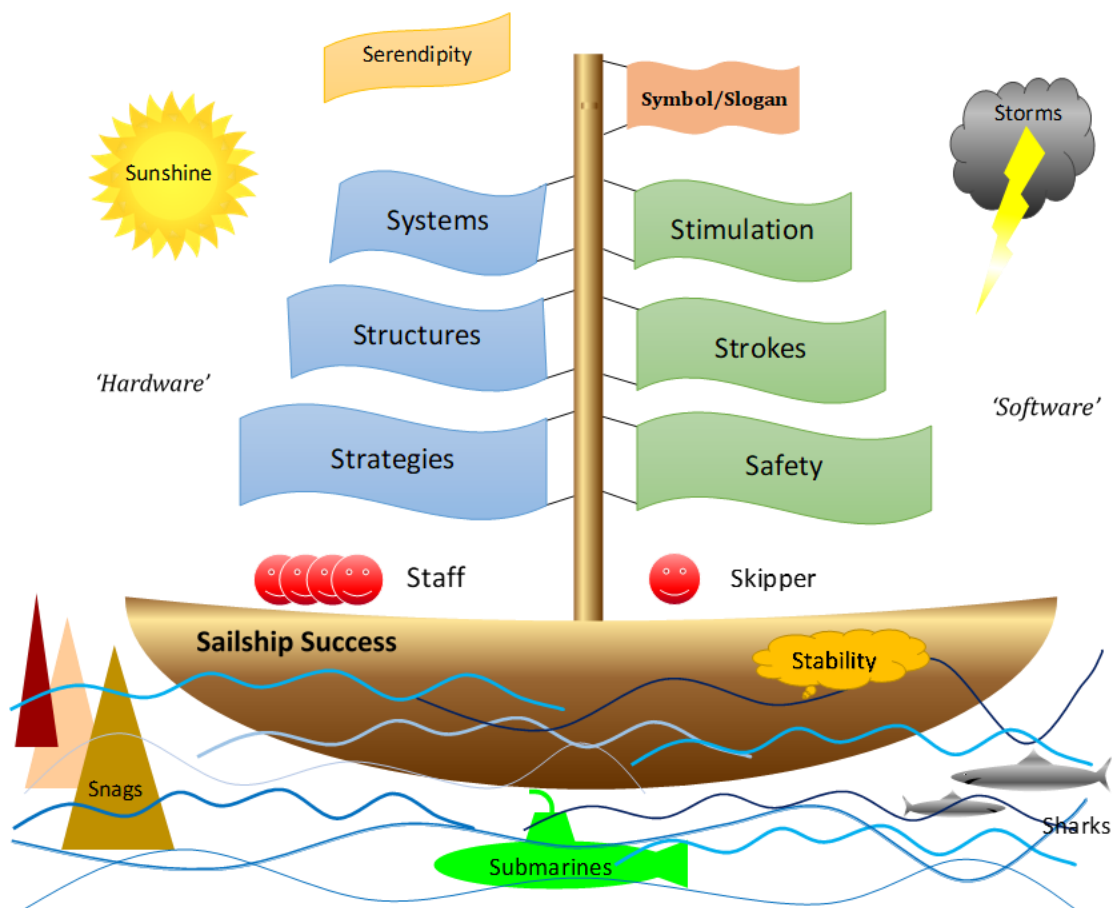
A criticism sometimes levelled at transactional analysts is that they are out of touch with the 'real world' and pay attention only to the people and not the practicalities of organisations. I (Hay, 1995, 2000, 2004) responded to this by developing a model I call Sailship Success, which uses the metaphor of a sailing ship to represent an organisation. A metaphor is a way of understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. This has benefits in terms of prompting people

to step outside their current perceptual limits and to 'see' things in new ways – enabling them to identify both problems and options that they may have been overlooking.

The Sailship Success metaphor contains elements of the ship and those who sail it, and of the sea and the weather, that can be taken to represent a wide range of aspects related to organisational cultures, structures, operations and personnel.

This particular metaphor, therefore, prompts leaders to consider the more strategic elements of their leadership role and not just the 'soft skills' associated with leading people. It also reflects reality in that a ship must make its way on an unpredictable ocean, just as leaders can never predict with total certainty what aspects of the environment might impact next on their organisation. Leaders, and groups of leaders, can be invited to consider each part of the metaphor in turn, in terms of what they have now, what might happen in the future (positive and negative scenarios), what they are able to change or at least influence, and what they need to do about any of this.

Keep in mind that schools are organisations, as are psychotherapy centres. There are many different kinds and sizes of ships. Even independent practitioners and contractors can be thought of as small boats, and maybe even canoes. Partnerships might be catamarans. In such cases, you might consider the nature of the larger ships you are sailing alongside, and what it is like when you tie up alongside or when you spend time aboard the larger ship that may be your client organisation.

The three sails on the left – strategies, structures and systems – are the 'hardware' of the organisation; the three sails on the right – safety, stroking and stimulation – are the 'software'. The left-hand sails define *what*; the right-hand sails are about *how*.

The situation becomes the sea; snags (or obstacles) are shallows, sharks or even submarines (containing spying competitors); we need stability to cope with the waves of change; and serendipity refers to the weather, which may be storms or sunshine because luck does seem to be a factor in the success or failure of some organisations; we cannot always forecast or control events.

The people on board have the skills, strengths and shortcomings, and on the mast there may be a slogan and a symbol. If we are using this model as a practitioner, we might introduce more fun into the group we are working with by suggesting that they think about who is the skipper or ship's captain, whether there is a ship's cat or mascot, and the quality of the ship's biscuits or supplies. An example of the latter might be the large organisation in the midst of a culture change where senior management decided to signal how serious the company's financial problems were by discontinuing the provision of biscuits at meetings; this had the unintended consequence of leading employees to decide that they might as well give up and leave the organisation now if things were so bad.

In addition to the elements shown in the figure as part of the ship, we can pay attention to whether our organisation is a **solitary ship or part of a fleet.** Do we belong to a multi-national, where we have many ships that are scattered widely around the globe? Are we part of a more localised fleet? How large is our ship compared to others in the fleet? Are we safely in the centre with others around to protect us or are we on the fringes where we may be one of the early casualties if the organisation decides to divest itself of us or we may be boarded by pirates who are mounting a take-over bid?

If we are part of larger fleet, we can also think about how supplies and resources get into the fleet and then get transferred around. Is there a headquarters ship that sits safely in the centre and expects to receive the profits from the outlying ships? Or does HQ provide the money and other resources to enable the other ships to function? What processes are set up to communicate between members of the fleet, and how are supplies shipped from ship to ship? Are the supply lines at risk

from sharks or submarines? And if we are a solitary ship, how do we communicate and obtain supplies from land and *vice versa*? Or, if we are canoes, as mentioned above, how do we interact with the fleet?

Next we can review the **situation**. This is not under the control of the organisation, although it may well have been influenced by it. Senior management may have spent many hours with politicians, financiers, lawyers, and so on, in order to safeguard the future of the company. However, the situation can change through no fault of our leaders: products or services that were once widely acceptable may no longer be so; a government (or several) may change legislation so that working practices must be changed; consumer groups may be formed that buy shares in a company so they can influence policy.

Note that the situation may be good or bad. There may be storms (or hopefully just squalls) approaching, we may be sailing into smog or the sun may be shining. There may be pressure groups that are trying to affect the organisation – perhaps the product is one that adversely affects the environment or that causes side effects to which people object. The situation may be unclear and difficult to predict or we may be experiencing a fortuitous period, when all seems set fair for our organisation to succeed. The point of labelling some of this serendipity is to emphasise that there are many things within the situation surrounding an organisation which cannot be controlled by the management within the organisation – the organisation may appear to be lucky or unlucky depending on the 'weather'.

The snags may be a significant part of the situation. These are specific problems, such as competitors who can be likened to submarines lurking unseen but capable of inflicting serious damage unless we can torpedo them first. Or there may be sharks swimming around and waiting to seize

unsuspecting employees who operate at the organisational boundaries or who need to visit other parts of the fleet. Again, it may not be possible to control these elements from within the ship – often the only thing that can be done is to keep a good lookout – monitoring the environment so there is plenty of warning given about potential hazards.

When we come to the **sails**, the metaphorical meaning is that the ship will not sail where we want to go unless the sails are set appropriately. The 'hardware' sails are the tangible, practical elements of the organisation and the 'software' sails are the more psychological aspects.

The **strategies** sail encompasses the overall strategic direction of the organisation, so that there is a clear vision of the desired future translated into some kind of mission statement that:

- has a limited number of key principles
- is written in language that all can understand, and
- has been developed into objectives through a process that involves as many people as possible.

The key question here is: where is the ship sailing to and what subsidiary strategies are needed to make sure it gets there?

Structures need to be designed to allow people to show initiative and make decisions that will enable the organisation to implement its strategies. Sometimes an organisational structure fails to match the strategies. This may happen when a new strategic direction is defined but the old organisational structure remains intact. For example, the mission of an organisation may be developed to include innovation but the structure may be left strictly hierarchical. By the time all levels have considered a new idea, it is no longer innovative because a competitor has done it first.

Systems need to be designed to reinforce both the strategies and the structures. Again, systems are often left untouched when other changes are being made. An instance of this was the multi-national corporation that changed to flatter management structures in order to empower people, but then left the system in operation that allowed only managers at a certain level to sign for any expenditure. Junior employees were expected to show more responsibility but were not given the corresponding authority.

When we come to the 'soft' sails, the major sail is **safety**. Safety in this metaphor refers to psychological safety, which may be considered within a transactional analysis framework as a culture of I'm OK, You're OK, and encouragement of autonomy for all individuals. Physical safety may be a component but it is possible to have a well-functioning organisation with high morale without a guarantee of physical safety – such as an army, or those engaged in humanitarian work. The key to psychological safety is that employees feel able to:

- be open about their concerns

- admit to their problems and weaknesses without being afraid that the organisation will punish them

- feel able to challenge those further up the organisational hierarchy

It also requires that they trust the organisation to be honest with them and to tell them if the organisation has problems. Psychological safety does not imply job security but it does encompass an atmosphere in which such matters are openly discussed. If people are afraid they are going to be thrown overboard to the sharks, they may decide to leave the ship while they can still get a seat in a lifeboat.

Referring directly to TA, the **stroking** sail refers to the organisational stroking, or recognition, patterns. Organisations create their own unique stroking patterns which

consist of the ways people are recognised for doing what the organisation wants – or negatively stroked for failing to perform. An analysis of the stroking patterns within an organisation will show how the culture is reinforced all the time. The stroking pattern determines motivation because people will tend to do what gets stroked rather than what they are told to do. The stroking pattern will often be heavily biased towards the leadership and motivational style of the leader; this can mean that competent workers are overlooked because they don't do the job in quite the same way as the leader would.

The final 'soft' sail, **stimulation**, relates to the TA concept of physis (Berne 1968) and refers to the variety of ways in which growth is encouraged, creativity is fostered and initiative is valued. It encompasses the arrangements made for ongoing development of people. And most important of all, it includes celebration – events, activities, rituals that reinforce both small and large successes – including initiatives that turn out to be mistakes and which are celebrated as learning opportunities!

Within an organisation, it is essential that the **sails are set appropriately**. The way the sails have been drawn in varying sizes represents their relative significance. If either of the largest sails is not properly set, the one above cannot function; likewise the topsail if the middle sail is wrongly set. Thus, we need clear strategies before we can determine the best structure for our organisation, and we need to sort out our structures before we design the systems we require. We need emotional and psychological safety before employees will feel able to give and accept positive strokes, and we need a healthy stroking climate before they can be stimulated to grow, develop and be creative.

Standing on the deck are the people who must raise the sails and crew the ship with their range of **skills,** strengths and

shortcomings. Much of the stability of the ship will depend on the ways in which crew members do their jobs. How well can they set the sails to cope within the situation? Are the sails of strategy, for instance, set up to cope promptly with any sudden change in the wind direction? Leaders need to ensure that they choose and train employees to have the appropriate range of skills for sailing the specific ship to its chosen destination.

One final element is that flying from the mast is the flag, which hopefully contains a slogan and possibly a symbol.

Slogans are an important part of mission statements, as they capture the principle in a way that is a constant reminder. Getting them wrong can have a significant negative impact, as when British Rail adopted 'We're getting there' at a time when their trains were frequently late or cancelled.

Symbols likewise have a powerful impact, seeming to 'speak' metaphorically to the mind in a way that words cannot match. Some years ago, UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher put her handkerchief over the tail of a model aeroplane at an exhibition; this was a powerful, and unfortunately public, indicator that British Airways' change of corporate design was not as well received as it had hoped.

The **impact of metaphor** is why the Sailship Success is so useful in prompting leaders to consider the various factors that will influence whether their organisation will achieve its aims. Using a metaphor adds additional insights that tend to be overlooked when a more rational planning approach is used. Using a metaphor also seems to tap into the creative parts of a leader's personality, so that innovative ideas are more likely to emerge. Each element identified can, of course, be explored further using additional, more familiar, frameworks as a precaution before any action is taken – but the metaphor itself is what stimulates new perspectives.

This has been an overview of the model – during the workshops and webinars each section of it will be covered in more detail – see www.pifcic.org for more information.

References

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