

Strengthening Systems

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“Much of what takes place in organizational life takes place not in the center ring, but in the side shows” (Oshry, 1992, p. 113).

There is a problem in the community (pick one: fights, grades, hazing, alcohol, drugs, property damage, etc.). Administrators are worried so they crack down. Members wonder how things that are “normal” to them are suddenly a problem for others so they respond in protest. Council leaders bring the voices of members to administrators. Administrators set up new rules and guidelines, most of which are out of touch with reality. Some leaders understand and champion these new expectations. Others side with members who find them frustrating. As a group the membership is torn. They break into factions. Nothing changes. Now there are more problems. The cycle continues.

This community is out of balance. Each individual wants to achieve equilibrium so they react instinctively to the disturbance, but this only shifts the location of the imbalance. From the outside we can clearly see a pattern at work, but community members find it difficult to visualize the system as a whole from their position inside of it. Lacking perspective, their instinctive reactions perpetuate the problem and weaken the community. This pattern plays out repeatedly in every large, complex social system, and it is especially apparent in fraternity/sorority life.

During the decades he spent studying the structures of social systems, Barry Oshry saw many of these familiar patterns emerge. Those at the top of the community become overwhelmed with their responsibility for allocating resources and ensuring the community’s success. In order to cope with the complexity, they tend to absorb more leadership, responsibility, authority, and autonomy from others in the system, but their decisions can be out of touch with the problems experienced by those at the bottom. Those at the bottom tend to react by blaming and uniting against the top, who they see as responsible for creating these problems. Individuals in the middle of the community feel torn by their responsibility for managing outcomes and coordinating the work. Under pressure to manage everything and satisfy everyone, they lose touch with one another and with the larger system (Oshry, 1992, 1999, n.d.).

When community members follow these natural tendencies, their actions result in turf warfare, rebellion, overreaction, polarization, and fractured relationships (Oshry, 1992, 1999, n.d.). The temptation is to intervene and apply force to create change, but the system will push back. In the meantime, symptoms and side effects distract all attention from addressing the fundamental problem (Senge, 1990). During this extended side show, potential threats to the community can become realized, and it can miss opportunities for growth and improvement (Oshry, 1992). In short, most people spend their time distracted by one another’s drama and correcting what appears broken rather than seeing that the system is responsible for its brokenness.

Oshry explains that the strength of a community—its capacity for survival and development—ultimately lies in its “mechanisms and processes for coping with the dangers and prospecting among opportunities” (Oshry, 1992, p. 114). Building strength requires looking beyond the side show drama to understand how the community operates, gaining an appreciation for these dynamics, and learning new ways to respond to imbalance. Rather than sucking up responsibility, those at the top should function as

developers, releasing control and empowering community members to build solutions together. Rather than trying to be everything to everyone, those in the middle should disperse and integrate, bringing all perspectives together to problem-solve collaboratively. Rather than revolting against the problems “they” created, those at the bottom should engage in helping the community fix its problems (Oshry, 1992, 1999, n.d.).

We need to get over the idea that fraternity/sorority professionals are the keepers of the knowledge in systems. This might be uncomfortable, but it is necessary. What would happen if we learned to live with discomfort? How would it change our work? What would happen if we acknowledged that the daily problems we face have no single cause or solution? Would our role become irrelevant?

Or would this breakthrough force us to take responsibility for community health, not community results? Would it allow us to engage members in meaningful conversation about their own role and responses to the system? Could we guide, shape, and mold a fraternal community so it has a greater capacity to survive and develop on its own? This alternate response changes the trajectory of the system without falling into the trap of policy, reaction, resistance, rebellion, accountability, and more policy.

Simply put, fraternity/sorority professionals must resist the instinct to be the firefighters, program planners, deciders, experts, and rule enforcers. Instead, we must become community builders by bringing resources and opportunities for the community to develop itself, integrating varying perspectives, and engaging members in understanding and fixing the problems for themselves.

We are playing out an age-old story. Only when we are able to step back from the narrative and see the story for what it is can we change it.

References

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