



Workplace Dynamics

An Introduction to the Autonomi Methodology

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Organizational Dynamics - A Primer

Note: The first few sections of this document will detail how organizational dynamics work, why they are important, and how to identify potentially dysfunctional dynamics within your organization. If you want to simply skip past that and understand how our diagrams work, go ahead and skip down to the section "Let's Get Technical" for a legend and explanation.

Why Organizational Dynamics?

The Organizational Dynamics offering from Autonomi was born for one simple reason:

A strong focus on process excellence means nothing if your people's personal goals are antithetical to the goals of the company.

Now what exactly does that mean? Let's start with an example.

Take a moment to think back to the last interpersonal struggle you had to deal with at the office. Maybe a direct report of yours did not meet expectations on something you had tasked them with. Maybe you watched in frustration as a group of your employees passed the blame for why a certain deadline or milestone wasn't hit.

In that confrontational moment, where your focus is on getting to the bottom of the issue, a split arises between your goals and theirs.

You want to make sure that the problem does not happen again, they want to make sure they are able to save face with you as much as possible.

If your workplace culture is significantly damaged, they may outright lie about the cause of the issue, leaving you in the dark about what is actually going on with your business. More likely, they will report the issue to you with some kind of "spin", minimizing their potential for personal reputational damage in your eyes.

It may even be that they are not sure how it happened themselves, but they don't really want to just *admit* that to you and look incompetent in the process.

In any case, you now have a distorted view of the situation, leaving you in a disempowered state to actually address the issue at hand. Savvy business owners know that they must filter every message they receive through some set of reasoning to "really know" what happened.

You then get to work fixing the problem, only for another one to pop-up. Much of the time, your fix doesn't get to the root cause, forcing you to personally step in to fix the same problems, again (and again, and again).

Put simply, this happens all the time, leading to the "fires" that always need to be put out.

At Autonomi, our sole mission is to enable you to spend your time doing only the things you want to do. And let's be frank about it, **putting out fires is both fantastically tedious and an enormous waste of time.**

The Wrong Way to Prevent Fires

Typically, when business owners get tired of putting out fires, they normally opt for more control. The rationale is that more the situation at hand can be "designed", the more you will be able to know what is going on regardless of the breakdown in reporting. Intelligent re-design of established systems and processes also initially appears to be the answer to solving recurrent issues. If the situation that gives rise to the fire is never allowed to occur in the first place, the fire itself will also not occur.

Makes sense right? This is sound, rational decision making.

The desire for greater control is also fueled by the transition from the early stages of a business into maturity. As a business reaches the point of stability, standard operating procedures, systems, and set roles and responsibilities reinforce the reliability and predictability of the business from a revenue perspective.

Where this dynamic goes wrong is that the more control you establish over the roles and responsibilities that an individual contributor has, the more their individuality is oppressed by the system. The greater an individual's propensity to perform high quality work, the lower their tolerance will be for this type of systemic oppression.

The independent actors required to reliably stabilize and expand a business are intrinsically motivated by personal autonomy.

Think of the cliché of the micromanaging boss. Micromanagement is a common complaint amongst employees because no employee wants to be treated as if they are incapable of performing work without constant support. Over restrictive control mechanisms force otherwise perfectly capable workers into positions that do not align with their expectations of the job.

This is the catch-22 of attracting and maintaining a strong workplace culture that supports highly talented individuals. The more talented an individual is, the more autonomy they will desire in the day-to-day activities that they take on, and the more holistic they desire their view of how their work is contributing to the company's goals to be. If this autonomy is not given, they will lose their intrinsic motivation to contribute to the effort and will half-heartedly participate while looking for better opportunities.

Things only go according to plan when the incentives of everybody involved are aligned. What started out as an effort to put out fires before they start can quickly devolve into incentivizing successfully lower pools of talent to join your ranks while repelling the employees that will really move the needle.

You see, what makes control such a double-edged sword is that as you exert more control over your organization, you sacrifice individual talent for systemic predictability. As a cultural strategy, this used to work quite well. However, with the current state of economic competition, successful businesses are those that can properly balance the standards and regulations needed to ensure systemic reliability with the flexibility to allow their employees to perform their best work.

So the question becomes this: How can you create an organization that is controlled enough to put out the fires, but not controlled to the point of dehumanization and rebellion of its employees (causing more fires)?

That is what our practical approach to Organizational Dynamics is all about.

Addressing the Elephant in the Room

There is one, universal issue that all businesses face. It's an issue that no amount of process improvement, software upgrades, intelligent automation, staff augmentation or management consulting can fix.

Politics.

If you get a group of people together and tell them that some of them are “more powerful” than others, and that there are a limited number of positions of power to be had, the individuals within the group will begin competing for that power. It is simply human nature. It's neither a good thing or a bad thing, it just is.

People who have a greater propensity to consolidate this power are considered more “ambitious” than those who do not. Even those individuals who decide to opt out of the standard game of power are simply seeking to achieve power through a type of moral superiority complex, but it is still all about power.

People seek power because it grants them a greater level of control over the events that unfold in their lives, both inside and outside of their occupation. The perception that an individual has a growing level of control over their own lives is arguably the most important component of ensuring their psychological, existential stability.

Now, I'm going to assume that as a business leader you are more than familiar with the power game and skip over the part where I “breakdown” how this unravels within an organization. None of us here are naïve, so let's get right to the uncomfortable truths of the matter.

Every single person in your organization is either directly involved in some conquest for power or has completely checked out.

Although there are plenty of people who have checked out who will diligently perform adequate work, the high performers that routinely exceed expectations are doing so in the conquest of greater personal power. With very few exceptions, the more impressive an individual's demonstrated abilities are, the more intense their personal pursuit of power is.

How power is defined by a given individual comes down to their value system, a topic that will be broken down in far greater detail in the “Let’s get Technical” section of this document. For now, it’s sufficient to understand that personal pursuits for power can be different.

One person may see achieving personal power as the absolute mastery of a given skillset, allowing them to exist at the pinnacle of any hierarchy in which that skillset is required, derive a sense of personal empowerment from the freedoms they unlock with these skills (example: a computer developer who can create pretty much anything), and assume control over those who are dependent on their skillset.

Another may see achieving a certain rung on the corporate ladder as achieving personal power, earning a deep sense of personal satisfaction with every progressive change of title. Others may even just want to exert their impact on a situation, whether that be a large-scale situation (such as combatting organized crime) or a small-scale one (such as control over the outcome of a business decision). What a person considers to be the ascertainment of power is much less important than the fact that the overwhelming majority of people in your company are engaged in some type of competition around power.

You are doing this same thing at the level of your marketplace. Isn’t your business a conquest for some combination of impact, status and personal freedom?

The thing about this pursuit of power is that in many cases, this pursuit serves as the primary, intrinsic motivating factor for the individual’s work performance. The people who love their jobs feel that way because their job allows them to pursue the power that is most valuable to them.

People, when left to their own devices, will always pursue a situation in which they can maximize the potential for their gain of self-defined personal power.

The culmination of these pursuits of personal power amongst your employees can be the engine that propels your business forward, or the chaotic force that prevents you from getting ahead.

The Pursuit of Power in Hierarchical Systems

In hierarchical systems (such as a business), the pursuit of power occurs through a counter-cultural subsystem denoted as **the informal hierarchy**. While the organizational chart (i.e **the formal hierarchy**) of company denotes the roles, responsibilities, and reporting chains of the company in a relatively static manner, the informal hierarchy is dynamic, constantly changing environment in which alliances form and break as each individual pursues power.

While people interact with each other within the formal framework to uphold the air of professionalism and stability that all businesses require, individual pursuits of personal power color the 1-on-1 and small-group dynamics that happen at all other times.

Put simply, most people will diligently perform their work and uphold the image of themselves as an idealistic employee with no other intentions than to deliver high-quality work. Meanwhile, these same individuals make their moves in the small comments that happen in the hallway, the hushed conversations that happen after the meeting, the private instant messages, and the lunch breaks had with their coworkers.

Thus we arrive at the heart of what it really means to have alignment:

Organizational Alignment occurs when the individual pursuit of power each person engages in (the informal hierarchy) reinforces the goals and operational narrative of the organization (the formal hierarchy).

Organizational Alignment is a matter of ensuring that your people are each individually incentivized to behave in a manner that pushes the organization forward.

Incentivization is the Key

People are in the business of fulfilling their intentions. Every single action that each one of us take is in the pursuit of some future state in which one of our current desires is transformed into reality.

You start building a business with the intent of being a successful business owner in the future. You eat when you are hungry with the intent of no longer having hunger pangs in the near future. You exercise with the intent of maintaining a sense of health and wellness into the future.

Current actions are always taken with the intent of some kind of future reward. This future reward is what we will consider to be the “incentive”.

Where the deeper problems within an organization begin and end is in the incentivization structures that are built within it. If an individual realizes that performing actions that do not help the organization is more likely to provide them with power than performing actions that do, then they will perform unhelpful actions.

A simple example of this would be technical writer whose work performance is primarily measure in words written per day. In this case, the writer is incentivized to prioritize quantity over quality. If the organization they work for built their brand on high-quality work, they are shooting themselves in the foot by creating an incentive structure around the writer that rewards throughput over clarity.

Goodhart’s law states that as soon as a metric becomes a target, it ceases to be a good metric. This is because it incentivizes the person to hit the target above all else, even if that means a decrease in the actual performance that the metric was designed to measure.

A more complex example of this is an ambitious high performer who wants to move up but is subjected to a non-negotiable minimum experience requirement for the next promotion. Since they cannot meet their goal of progression through the established framework, they will first try to manipulate the informal hierarchy to become an exception to that rule. This can cause a variety of issues dependent on the chain of actions the individual sees as the best path forward.

Should they create resentment/distrust in senior leadership to inspire the person in charge of their promotion to break the minimum rule requirement? Should they sabotage the work of others at their level so that they appear to be the best option for promotion, better than those who do meet the requirement? Should they waste upper management's time with pleas about their work? It all depends on the nature of the incentive structure, and they will do all of this and more if it appears to be the best way to meet their goal of securing the promotion.

If they are unable to manipulate the informal hierarchy to their benefit, they will become disillusioned and focus on forming 1-on-1 alliances with people as high up the ladder as they can in order to get their personal support when they move on to pursue a higher position at a different company. Meanwhile their work performance plummets. To them, there is no reason to continue to produce high quality work because the incentive is to do so is simply not there.

The key to affecting true organizational change (and ensuring organizational alignment) is to identify and correct the incentivization structures that led the people within the company to exhibit behaviors that are not in the best interest of the company.

You see, **political issues are not the cause of problems** such as missed deadlines, high employee attrition, and failed projects. **They are the effect of the broken set of incentivization schemes** that inspired the individuals involved to take the actions that caused these problems.

Sidebar: What About 'Flat' Organizations?

It seems important to briefly touch on the “flat” organization before moving forward, as it's easy to assume that the formal hierarchy itself is what is responsible for the development of bad incentivization schemes.

If you are unfamiliar, a “flat” organization is one in which the idea of some people having more formal power than others is completely disregarded. Instead, everyone in the organization acts in a cooperative fashion to perform the work that come in. Teams self-organize around projects and the leadership position within these groups in typically rather fluid, with those who have the most knowledge/expertise in a given area stepping up to the plate whenever the situation calls for it.

For flat organizations to work, everyone within the organization must be empowered to reach their personal pursuits of power completely unencumbered. Of course, this means that people who are motivated by rising through an organization's formal hierarchy are ill suited for inclusion in a flat organization. Instead, these companies are filled with people whose primary motivation is skill development, with each person within the company taking it upon themselves to ascend to mastery in an individual yet critical component of the company's operations.

The biggest issue that flat organizations face in terms of organizational dynamics is that they are inherently fragile systems. Finding the right people to join the team is rather challenging as the value systems of everyone with the company must be totally aligned behind growth and skill progression. People who are motivated by other core factors, such as homeostasis or perceived impact, will not mesh well as the organization is inherently not setup to provide them a path to receive these rewards. People like this quickly lose all of their informal power as they are informally ostracized for their inability to be a proper team player, become disillusioned, and leave the company.

When the company faces issues, they are also much more detrimental to its internal dynamics. Informally, flat organizations typically operate on meritocracy system in which there is an underlying competition between all parties in their pursuit of mastery of their individual skillsets. Should a project miss a deadline, that miss will be attributed to a lack of skill development amongst those who were working on that project, lowering the trust that others have in their abilities as a subject matter expert in that area. Since those on the project are motivated by skill progression, this evidence of the apparent inadequacy of their skills can damage their self-perception.

Unfortunately, this can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the individual feels as if they can't "keep up" with their coworkers, performs lesser quality work, gets more reinforcement of that position, and eventually leaves the company due to their self-perceived inadequacy.

Psychologically, this is a much "darker" experience than the failures typically experienced in a standard hierarchical organization and can lead to vicious downstream effects for both the individual and the company alike.

The greatest asset a flat organization has is also its greatest liability: there is only one incentivization scheme, and it is all or nothing. There is no game that can be played other than the individual game of mastery. There is no "moving up" rather than what you are able to do within your domain. The pool of available talent is much smaller as those who seek rewards such as money, power, or status are not likely to succeed in the organization, and the remediation of issues is much more difficult given the interdependency of the team on the skill set of any given individual.

The moral of the story: an organization's hierarchical structure is only one piece of the puzzle when it comes to its internal dynamics. This is the reason that re-organization based cultural projects usually fail to produce the anticipated results, and why we do things a little differently here at Autonomi.

Our Process

Our organizational development process consists of two distinct phases: the investigation phase, and the remediation phase.

Phase I: Investigation

During the investigation phase, Autonomi consultants join the targeted team as process improvement consultants. They will sit in on meetings, ask questions, talk to people, and otherwise get a sense of what is going on in the organization. During this phase of the process, we pay close attention to the subtleties of every interaction we see, especially any complaints, playful jabs, or other communication that may point to more going on beneath the surface. After spending a couple of days with the group, we will be able to identify the main actors in the ongoing situation.

Once the core people involved have been identified, we talk to them in a 1-on-1 capacity to get a strong sense of what is going on in their world, why they are doing the things they are doing, and how the overall dynamic of the group influences the individuals within it. During these meetings we make sure to discuss that we are only there to make their lives better and aren't going to use anything they say to us to put them in a disadvantageous position. Establishing this level of trust is *critical* if we are to get to the core of the issues your organization faces.

It is of the utmost important that we have your buy-in as a business leader here. We are not in the business of identifying who should be thrown under the bus, and we aren't here to find you someone to become the target of your frustrations. If there is any "fault" to be placed, it is with the designer of the incentivization system. The people within the system are simply doing what they feel they must to achieve their goals. As such, they are treated as the good faith actors who are simply acting in their own benefit. Our goal is to identify where the **system** is broken, not the people. We just use the way that the people within the system act to figure that out.

Once we fully understand the situation at hand, we prepare a detailed, comprehensive report that gives you everything you need to put the problems to bed. We will include our proprietary diagrams, written descriptions of the interpersonal interplay down the individual level, and our exact recommendations on how to go about changing your organization for the better.

If you would rather we just take care of everything outright, we move into directly into Phase II.

Phase II: Remediation

In the remediation phase, we immediately get to work enacting the implementation plan that we have laid out in the report. While every situation is different, here are a few quick examples of tactics we may use to carry out a remediation effort:

Group Intervention: In a group intervention, we bring all involved actors into a single room and lead the uncomfortable discussion in which the informal hierarchy is brought out into the light for everyone to see. In this blameless interaction, we discuss how the situation is actually damaging everyone involved, and layout a framework by which each individual can achieve their goals. Individuals may also be spoken to on a 1-on-1 capacity afterward in which we provide them with guidance that cuts through the layers of falsity and gives them a clear, actionable method of achieving their personal power.

A major facet of Group Intervention is that there is absolutely zero tolerance for retaliation of any kind, no matter how insignificant it may seem to be. We set up this dynamic by ensuring that each individual within in the interaction remains a blameless actor that was subjected to a dysfunctional system. The point at which we can get everyone involved in the situation to understand why the others in the situation made the moves that they did is the point at which the dysfunctional system can be eradicated once and for all.

The real talk: Most situations that require Group Intervention are caused because people don't feel like they can treat each other like adults. Layers of falsity and political illusion are built around the concept those aware of the situation cannot possibly directly confront it out of fear of retaliation. By putting everything out on the table, everybody's position is completely exposed. After this exposure, the only possible way for the people involved to continue on their quest for personal power is to realign themselves to be actors in a new, more beneficial incentivization system.

Individual Intervention(s): In an individual intervention, we meet with the core individual(s) that is propagating the situation 1-on-1 and present ourselves as the external influencer that has the power to help them achieve their power pursuit. Using this positioning, we are able to create an air of trust with the individual that transcends typical “polite and professional” conversation and get them to admit to the reasoning behind their actions. Ensuring a completely non-judgmental environment, we focus on the goals that they have and present the idea that their goals are best achieved by following a different set of actions.

We then escalate the dynamic further by reinforcing our position as external agents that have the direct power to influence senior leadership, and thus ensure that the course of action we prescribe is indeed their best strategy for achieving their pursuit of power.

In the rare cases where the individual is completely opposed to changing their actions and is actively defiant of our recommendations, we are willing and able to take disciplinary action on your behalf, all the way up to and including termination. We never want to be the “bad guys” in the situation, but we are more than willing to do the dirty work should we collectively deem it necessary to do so.

After the remediation has been held, we will stick around for a little while to ensure that the change is permanent and that nobody slips back into the old, dysfunctional system. We consolidate every conversation we had and the aftermath of the implementation into a quick post-remediation debrief that we provide you as a deliverable during our post-project meeting. After that, we remain engaged with the situation for the next 4 weeks, enabling you to receive immediate assistance regarding any unforeseen situations as the change reverberates throughout your organization.

Let's Get Technical

So how exactly is it that we go about identifying these rather complex, nuanced issues that have arisen within your company? Glad you asked.

We analyze 7 different psychological and sociological frameworks around the group as a whole, the 1-on-1 dynamics within the group, and the individuals themselves in order to gain a deep understanding of where the issues you face are stemming from. The insight gathered from this investigation is consolidated into an Informal Hierarchy Diagram

The **Informal Hierarchy Diagram** allows our team to get a full, 360-degree view of the situation from every individual perspective. We are able to use this diagram to discover the motives, biases, and political pressures that encourage the members of the group to continue to interact in a dysfunctional manner.

We then go a step further to analyze the topics that are under discussion amongst the group in which the issue persists. The combination of these studies allows us to form a sophisticated picture of the internal cultural dynamics of your company, and where the broken incentivization schemes exist that are keeping the fires alive. This insight gathered from this investigation is consolidated into an Information Flow Diagram.

The Information Flow Diagram allows us to track how information about certain topics originates and transforms as it is dispersed throughout the group. By creating this mapping, we are able to pinpoint exactly where dysfunctional communication begins and identify the key individuals responsible (knowingly or otherwise) for propagating the dysfunctional system.

Informal Hierarchy Diagram

The Informal Hierarchy Diagram is arranged such that individuals who are higher in the formal hierarchy are located closer to the top of the diagram. Straight lines are used to connect individuals in a 1-on-1 capacity who have direct interaction. If no direct interaction is held, the line uniting the individuals is removed from the diagram.

Horizontal dotted lines are used to denote upward/downward positioning within the formal organizational hierarchy. In cases where individuals exist at the same level of the formal hierarchy but occupy different teams (lateral communication), a vertical dotted line is used to denote this relationship.

In the 1-on-1 dynamics chart, interaction dynamics are labeled via an extension of the line that connects the two, numbered parties. The individual that a label is closest to denotes that individual as the actor who exercises the given dynamic on the other, connected party.

This is rather nuanced at first glance, so go ahead and read through the descriptions below. At the end of this section, a hierarchical diagram will be broken down in detail, allowing you to get a sense for the level of detail our Organizational Dynamics investigations provide.

Category: Tuckman Stage (Group)

The Tuckman Stage provides an indicator of how mature a team is in regard to the interpersonal dynamics within the group. Developed by Dr. Bruce Tuckman of Princeton University, the Tuckman stages of group development provide insight into the overarching framework of the political substructure that paints the interactions within the group.

Forming: In the forming stage, individuals within the group are unfamiliar with the others in the group and express anxiety, curiosity, and excitement regarding the new project. The political interplay that occurs during this stage of group formation is primarily characterized by the natural unfolding of a leader within group and is normally limited to fairly trivial skirmishes as people become familiar with each other and an unspoken narrative regarding the group's interaction with each other is formed. Very rarely will political issues form that require intervention at this stage

Storming: In the storming stage, individuals within the group begin to push against each other's boundaries and become more open about their quests for power within the group. Differences in work style, personalities, and skill level all come into play as the individuals engage in political interplay that involves the initial formation of unofficial alliances and strategic hierarchical positioning. During the storming stage, defiance of the official hierarchy is rather common as jockeying for the best initial position reigns supreme. The vast majority of easily identifiable political issue requiring intervention occur at this stage.

Norming: In the norming stage, individuals recognize and accept the positioning of themselves and the others in the group. It is at this point that the official hierarchy becomes the dominant narrative amongst the group, with political interplay occurring at the 1-on-1 level. During the norming stage, individuals asking for help and providing critical feedback occurs openly as these activities are no longer seen as direct threats to anybody's political position. Although very few easily identifiable political issues arise during the norming phase, many more covert issues that require intervention may arise during this stage.

Performing: In the performing stage, roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and accepted, allowing the group to perform at their highest collective potential. Although few teams ever fully reach this point, those that do experience political interplay that is in line with the goals of the organization. Competitions of work-quality, positive peer pressure, and other value providing activities are the primary methods by which the individuals within the group seek to ascertain personal power.

Adjourning: In the adjourning stage, upcoming group disbandment creates a sense of mourning within the group. While exceptionally ambitious individuals may have set up long-term political structures that reach their climax at this point, the vast majority of political interplay occurs in the individual one-on-one decisions on whether or not to continue their alliances after the dissolution of the group. Non-mutual decisions to this end may form resentment that can give rise to future, non-elevating interpersonal conflicts.

While understanding the group dynamic is important, there is a shared social pressure amongst the group to always adhere to the formal hierarchy and maintain an air of professionalism. The means that at a group level, it is quite difficult to achieve a concrete understanding of the situation at hand

Category: Interaction Dynamics (1-on-1)

Interaction dynamics describe the climate of the interaction between the individuals in a 1-on-1 capacity. Put simply, it is with what “regard” a given individual holds the other individual in, and what modality of thought is likely to paint the interaction when these individuals communicate. See **Figure 1**.

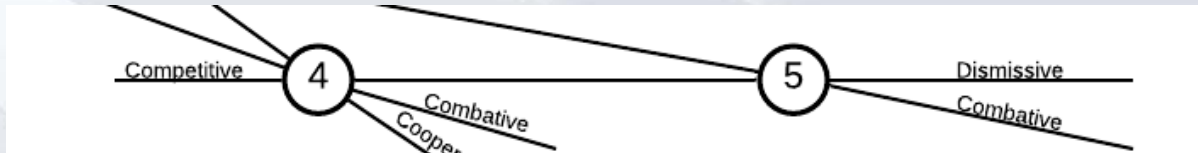


Figure 1: 1-on-1 Interaction Dynamics

In **Figure 1**, Person 4 is competitive toward Person 5, whereas Person 5 is dismissive of Person 4.

The culmination of an individual's 1-on-1 interactions with others within a group also provides a greater sense of the overall mentality and perspective that that person has toward the group. Individuals who possess a fairly similar dispositions toward the majority of others they interact with can be understood to be using congruency as one of the core facets of their position (normally associated with strongly individualistic personalities), while individuals who interact with others in a multitude of different ways can be understood to have a stronger propensity to change their interaction style based on shifts in status hierarchy.

At Autonomi, we define six distinct classes of interaction dynamics.

Cooperative: A person exercising cooperative dynamics is seen to be making a good faith effort to improve the position and social well-being of the other party. Cooperative dynamics usually point to either an alliance, in which the cooperation is reciprocated, or a mentor/mentee style relationship in which the cooperative individual provides assistance to the other party for some kind of moral or anticipated future benefit. Rarely, cooperative dynamics will be exercised by individuals who are being manipulated in an exploitative manner and are unaware of it.

Competitive: Competitive dynamics are marked by the distinct tendency of the individual to compare themselves to the other party in a "better-or-worse" type of frame. Common amongst those who exist at the same level of the formal hierarchy, competitive dynamics can take the form of either a positive rivalry, or a resentment driven quest for dominance. Although competitive dynamics are usually reciprocated, it is possible for an individual to exercise competitive dynamics towards someone who refuses to compete back, normally only exacerbating the intensity with which the exerciser strives to compete.

Combative: Individuals exercising combative dynamics are typically rather disillusioned. Quite open about their discontentment, combative individuals will be openly hostile toward the other party, creating situations of well-known conflict within the group. Combative dynamics most frequently occur in situations where a highly skilled individual is below a low skilled individual in the formal hierarchy and subjected to inadequate treatment due to the latter's recognition of the formers potential to overtake their position.

Supplicative: Supplicative interaction dynamics are characterized by an individual's willingness to completely follow the command of the other party in hopes of gaining some kind of favor in their eyes. In stark contrast to cooperative dynamics, supplicative dynamics are an open, unmistakable demonstration of the other party's dominance, superiority, and command over the supplicator. In common parlance, "yes men", "brown nosers", and similar turns of phrase are used to identify people exercising supplicative dynamics. This interaction typically occurs when an individual who is lower in the formal hierarchy is desperately attempting to improve their position within it, sacrificing their own value system in the process.

Dismissive: Dismissive dynamics are characterized by a complete lack of regard for the thoughts, opinions, and actions of the other party. Typically demonstrated only in situations in which the other party offer neither threat nor potential value to the person in question, dismissive dynamics are usually directed down the formal hierarchy. The most common case of dismissive dynamics is a direct reaction to supplicative dynamics.

Exploitative: Exploitative dynamics are characterized by an individual's tendency to influence the other party in a way that serves their own direct benefit without regard for any potential benefits or drawbacks the other party will receive. People exercising exploitative dynamics are normally rather cunning in nature, using either their superior formal position or keen understanding of the situation at hand to manipulate the other party into action. While exploitative dynamics can occur laterally within an organization, they are typically seen directed downward, for the purpose of either gaining the favor of their own superiors in the formal hierarchy or performing some type of informal information transfer.

The picture of the situation at hand is complete once the group and 1-on-1 dynamics are understood in the context of the individual actors that have given rise to them. By analyzing four distinct areas of individual behavior toward the group, communication breakdowns become easily

Category: Personal Dynamics (Individual)

Zooming into the individual, we now take a look at the modality of interaction that each person within the group uses to interact with group around them. This serves to put each of the interaction dynamics they have in context. If certain individuals act a specific way toward each other, each with their respective personal self-perceptions, we can form a much clearer picture of the exact nature of that interaction and the sublingual communication within in.

We have defined five distinct personal dynamic classifications. Although it is possible for an individual to exercise more than one of these at once, the vast majority of people have a dominant mode with which they use to self-identify their position amongst the group.

Note: It is important to note that the classifications below, though related to standard accepted social dynamic frameworks, are a proprietary framework used explicitly in the context of workplace groups. Therefore, previous familiarity with the social classifications of alpha, beta, gamma, sigma, and omega should be ignored in favor of the below definitions.

Alpha (α): People exercising alpha dynamics see themselves as leaders amongst their peers and gain a sense of comfort from ascending to and occupying a position of leadership within the informal hierarchy. They seek power directly through ascertainment and control of this position.

Beta (β): People exercising beta dynamics see themselves as supportive teammates amongst their peers and gain a sense of comfort from backing those a leadership position within the informal hierarchy. They seek power indirectly by reaping the spoils of the dynamic established by the individual(s) in the leadership position.

Sigma (σ): People exercising sigma dynamics see themselves as standalone entities who may enter and exit different positions in the informal hierarchy at will, seeking comfort in the perceived freedom and independence that such positioning grants them. They seek power both directly and indirectly by pursuing what they believe to be the most efficient way to achieve their goals within the group.

Category: Work Perspective (Individual)

Work perspectives describe the given individual's mental relationship with what is going on in their occupation. In the workplace psychology space, there have been several different conceptualizations of this framework. Here at Autonomi, we have forged our own path and combined these works into four distinct classifications that describe an individual's frame of mind regarding their progression in the workplace.

Climber: Climbers are high performing, ambitious individuals that fully understand the existence of the informal hierarchy and its relevance to actual career prosperity. They work diligently to perform both the formal work tasks and the informal strategic initiatives that are required to elevate their position in the company. Put simply, they understand "the game", and they are good at it. Climbers constitute the minority of individuals within your organization that tend to completely outshine the rest in terms of work quality, and likely constitute most (if not all) of your senior management and executive body.

Climbers are apprised of the informal hierarchy and are striving to get ahead. They always produce exceptional quality work.

Unaware: The Unaware are a group of individuals who would like to move up the formal hierarchy but are only vaguely aware of how "the game" is played. While they are typically diligent workers, they routinely find themselves on the receiving end of political backlash and fall out of favor with workplace superiors. These individuals tend to "blend in", albeit unintentionally, with their peers. More aggressive climbers may manipulate unaware employees into disadvantageous positions for their own benefit. Unaware individuals typically constitute around 30-40% of the organization.

The Unaware are not apprised of the informal hierarchy and are striving to get ahead. They typically produce above-average work.

Maintain: Maintainers are a group of individuals who perform their work tasks diligently while focusing on their lives outside of work. Seeing their occupation as more of a means to an end, they typically simply contribute their part to the effort and hand and remove themselves to the background. They have little to no interest in progression, normally only rising through a company's ranks due to their tenure at the firm. Maintainers typically constitute about 20 – 50% of the organization, depending on the industry.

Maintainers may or may not be apprised of the informal hierarchy but have no interest in getting ahead. They typically produce average quality work.

Standby: Standbys are a group of individuals, typically disillusioned, who perform the bare minimum required to keep their jobs. Normally actively disgruntled, standbys are “on their way out”, openly dismissive of their occupation and potentially even interviewing for positions at other companies. Although standbys typically always constitute 5-15% of an organization, the process of previous climbers reverting to standbys and leaving the organization is a telltale sign of cultural toxicity.

Standbys are typically somewhat apprised of the informal hierarchy but have no interest in participating in the company. They typically produce below average work.

Category: Motivating Factors (Individual)

An individual's collection of motivating factors gives rise to the value system with which they define their individual pursuit of power. Each motivating factor has a relative strength against all others, allowing us to define sophisticated expressions of an individual's value system in an elegant way. We define four fundamental aspects of an individual's value system.

Career Progression: Motivation by career progression is exactly as it sounds: how much an individual's actions are influenced by the desire to increase their rank in the formal hierarchy. People who value career progression relatively high are laser focused on positioning. They are prone to political maneuvering who intent is decreasing the apparent value of those around them or bolstering their own, tending to go against the formal hierarchy by default. On a personal level, they gain a strong sense of personal worth from the money, status, and power that are associated with their position. This is the realm of the "go-getter" and the "shining star", where extreme amounts of effort are put into increasing the **velocity** with which they can produce quality work.

As a motivating factor, career progression determines how aggressive an individual is willing to be in pursuit of their upward climb. Those who place lower importance on career progression are not likely to "stir the pot", whereas a highly motivated individual may develop vastly sophisticated strategies to manipulate the situation to their benefit.

Skill Progression: Motivation by skill progression is the desire of an individual to achieve mastery of the tasks they are performing for the company. People who value skill progression relatively high are laser focused on honing their craft. These employees are typically “builders”, delivering work products and organizing teams that vastly surpass all expectations, playing a pivotal role in your business. The political maneuvering, they take on is normally in the pursuit of delivering the best possible answer to the problems they are given and tends to align with the formal hierarchy by default. This is the realm of people who love their jobs and find them “fun.” They are passionate about ensure they perform the absolute highest quality of work that they are capable of, putting extreme amounts of effort into increasing the **quality** of work which they can delivery work on time.

As a motivating factor, skill progression determines how hard an individual is willing to work to increase their abilities. Those who place lower importance on skill progression are likely to simply do what they must, whereas highly motivated individuals may quickly become the “best” within their skillset in the company, and over time amongst the top of the industry.

Homeostasis: Motivation by homeostasis is the desire of an individual to ensure that the situation they are in remains the same. People who value homeostasis relatively high are laser focused on maintain their current position, both in career altitude and interpersonal relationships. These employees are those who make it a point to “blend in”, and see their occupation as little more than a means to ends that exist outside of the job. This is the realm of the “family man” or the “adventurer”, who see working in general as more of a necessary evil that empowers them to do the things in their personal lives that they want to do.

As a motivating factor, homeostasis determines how willing an individual is to do things that get them “noticed”. Those who place lower importance on homeostasis are more likely to make moves that damage alliances, defy authority figures, and attract attention to themselves. Those who value homeostasis heavily are more interested in forming personal relationships and ensuring that they produce a reliable stream of usable work products.

Perceived Impact: Motivation by perceived impact is an individual's desire to see their actions/efforts affect the situation at hand. This is a bit more nuanced than the other motivating factors, as perceived impact is about being able to see the how much control and influence a person has over their surroundings. This can be either good influence, in the case of becoming a critical part of the team, or bad influence, in the case of having complete, manipulative control of the informal hierarchy. Typically "creators", people who highly value perceived impact are laser focused on being the leaders of some kind of change, the more drastic the better. On a personal level, they get a strong sense of personal worth from the knowledge that their actions are making difference in the area they choose. While career progression and skill progression can be seen as an area of focus, perceived impact is a measure of intensity: How much does the individual care that they are the cause of the changes they are seeing in the ongoing situation. This is the realm of the "intrapreneur" and the "monster", whose goal is nothing more than to see their vision come to reality.

As a motivating factor, perceived impact determines the strength of the feedback loop an individual experiences as they seek their personally defined power. Those with a high value on perceived impact escalate the intensity of their moves (hard workers work harder as their work produces more results, ladder climbers become more manipulative as they gain career altitude, those fighting a cause fight harder as the situation begins to change, etc.). Those with a low value on perceived impact simply do what they must to achieve their goals with little change in intensity.

Category: Special Characters

In addition to the various classifications discussed above, there are two more symbols that are used to fully define the group's dynamics:



Informal Alliance Flag: The informal alliance flag is placed on a connecting conversational line between two people on the diagram. It is used when the people have a mutually beneficial relationship that extends beyond the bounds of professionalism. This includes friendships, romantic relationships, quid pro quo relationships, and other connections that go beyond the bounds of the organizational narrative. Relationships that exist outside of the bounds of professionalism are normally always superior to those that exist within them, and thus individuals within informal alliances will grant each other favor that would never be granted to others with which such a relationship is not established.



Disillusioned Flag: The disillusioned flag is placed on the individual level. It is used when a person has become disillusioned to the point of being openly critical of the ongoing activities of the organization. Disillusionment is a serious issue due to its contagious nature. Disillusioned individuals tend to be rather unpleasant and openly “kick the tires” of many facets of the organization, quickly spreading discontentment to any conversational partners they have and creating a self-sustaining toxicity within the political climate of the company. In all but the most extreme of edge cases, disillusioned individuals must be either “snapped out” of their disillusioned state or terminated in order to prevent further damage to the internal dynamics of the company.

An individual's social style describes the primary method of communication they connect with. Here at Autonomi, we use the standard accepted narrative of social styles. The diagram below explains the concept of social styles to a T. See **Figure 2**.

The Analysis in Action - Informal Hierarchy Diagram

The following diagram describes an unofficial reporting structure discovered in one of our previous client's organization. Names have been changed to protect the identities of the actors and company involved in accordance with our confidentiality agreement. (Note: this is the same diagram that is currently on the URS page of Autonomi website (<https://getautonomi.com/projects/case-study-unofficial-reporting-structures/>)). See Figure 3.

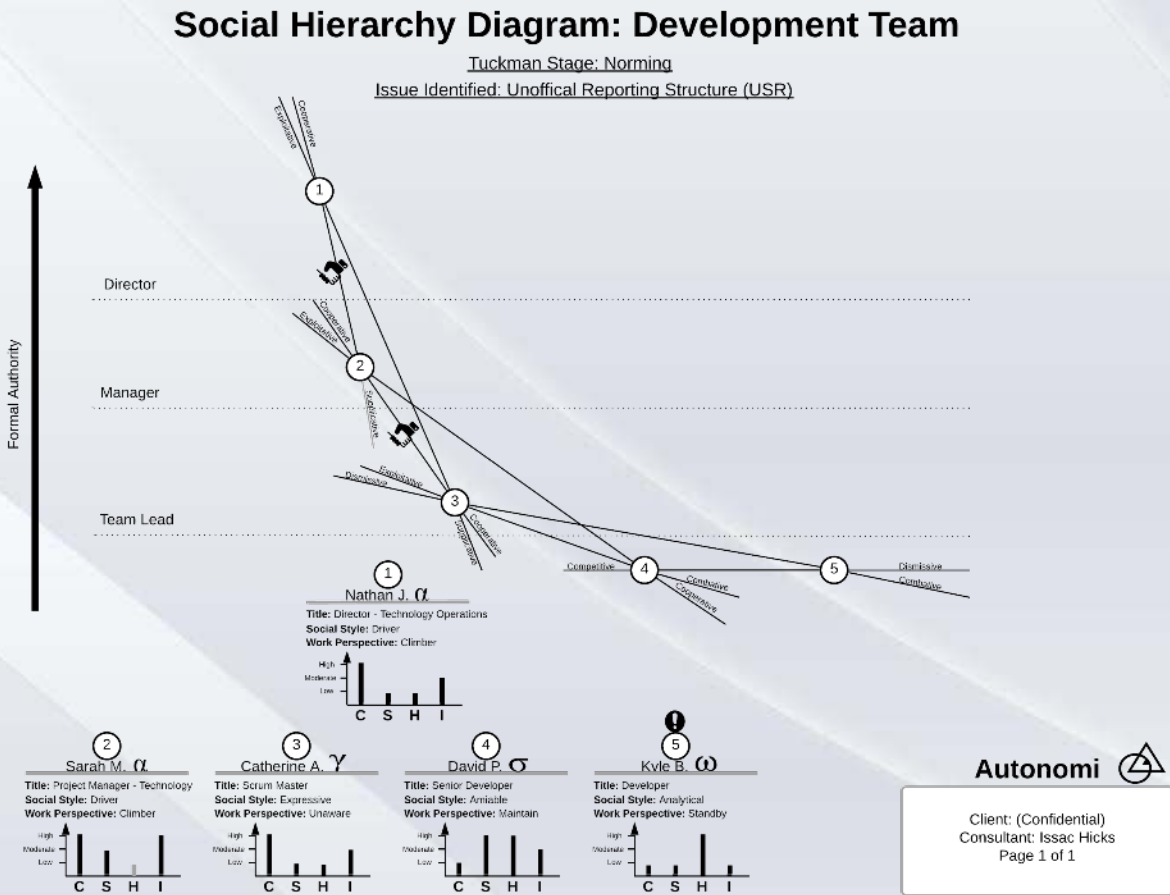


Figure 3: Unofficial Reporting Structure - Informal Hierarchy Diagram

So what exactly are we looking at here?

The unofficial reporting structure displayed above begins with the director, Nathan. On an individual level, Nathan is at the top of the formal hierarchy in question. As a driver individual who exists in an informal leadership position (α), his personality is rather aggressive. He is commanding in his presence, leads with authority, and shows little tolerance for non-compliance.

From his work perspective, we know that he is also very plugged into “the game”. He knows exactly what needs to happen for him to gain his next promotion (his most important motivating factor) and has the personal authority to see to it that it happens. As he is rather unmotivated by skill progression and homeostasis, he will be spending the majority of his time and energy on this quest. He is not worried about damaging relationships with his peers by the moves he knows he needs to make, and his moderate tendency to pursue perceived impact will grant him a growing sense of personal satisfaction as he sees the results of his string pulling.

As there is a visibility gap between executive leadership and the technology teams, Nathan knows that the key to his promotion is to appear to have led the most capable team. In order to do that, he needs to know what his people (and his peers’ people) are doing on the day-to-day. If he can know that he can use his executive power to make sure that “unforeseen issues” hit his peers’ teams, allowing him to make his move into the executive position.

Nathan starts his information gathering with Sarah, one of his direct reports. Also heavily progression motivated, Nathan knows that he can entice Sarah into providing him with whatever information he needs if he presents the opportunity to fill his vacant position to her when he moves up. Nathan and Sarah also regularly exchange comments and non-verbal communication that point to sexual tension, giving evidence of a powerful informal alliance in which the two will look out for each other above all else.

As a driver and climber herself, Sarah understands the game and understands the significance of the opportunity being presented to her by Nathan. Her personal desire for career progression, mixed with her high desire for perceived impact, makes her the perfect partner in enacting the moves that will be necessary to move the two of them up. Besides, Sarah has plans once she gets to the director seat. She has grown tired of “biding her time” at the project manager level and knows that she has what it takes to learn from and eventually surpass Nathan in her own quest for personal prosperity.

Sarah further recognizes that one of her close personal friends, Catherine, works directly with the team that funnels up to Nathan's closest rival in his quest for promotion. Although Catherine is not Sarah's direct report, they have been friends for years, even before they joined the company.

Now, Catherine wants to move up just as bad as Sarah and Nathan do, but she just doesn't "get it". She fully recognizes that Sarah and Nathan do "get it" though, and agrees to fully cooperate in getting any information Sarah and Nathan ask of her. In her eyes, this direct exposure to Nathan is great. She has grown rather tired of her position anyway. Her direct reports, David and Kyle, show her very little respect. She tried playing the "be a good leader" game for a while, but it just doesn't seem to be working for her, and this thing with Sarah and Nathan is her perfect chance to get ahead.

As someone who is unaware of how to play the game properly, Catherine's moves in the informal hierarchy are rather clunky and uncalibrated. It is very obvious to both of her direct reports that she is trying to do something slimy, and they don't like that at all. David is the most talented developer in the organization by far and just wants to focus on his work and have a calm work environment. As someone who doesn't feel the need to impress (or even get along with) their boss (σ), David is fairly open about refuting the things Catherine asks him to do.

David is also aware that Sarah is probably involved in something pretty slimy, but seeing as she is the project manager he feels he has little choice other than to just do what she says. Besides, she's pretty nice to him, and allows him to "go around" Catherine with his concerns. These are both great benefits for an amiable, conflict avoidant person who normally lives in disgust at the seemingly nonsensical actions of his boss.

Kyle, previously a climber turned standby, is wildly aware of this entire situation and wants nothing more than to expose it for what it is. At one point he was also playing the game, but he became completely disgusted with in when he realized that his chance of getting anywhere in the company without participating in the corruption was relatively slim. As an analytical individual, Kyle would rather be able to present a factual recount of the work he has done and use that as evidence of his abilities. Instead, he is frequently micromanaged by Catherine, who he sees as rather unintelligent, and who sees him as someone she must keep "under control", lest he expose her part in what is happening with Sarah and Nathan.

Using the power granted by his position in the formal hierarchy, and the information given to him by Sarah and Catherine, Nathan is able to strategically withhold approvals, prevent on-time releases, and otherwise stand in the way of actions taken by Catherine's team, seeing as they report up to one of Nathan's competitors for the promotion. Nathan knows he will be able to move Sarah up, but sees Catherine as rather incapable and expendable. At some level, Sarah knows this, but she also knows that her personal relationship with Catherine is strong enough that she will be able to act as if she didn't know that Nathan was going to screw her over.

The lasting resentment that Catherine will have for Nathan is now a tool that Sarah will be able to use as motivation in her own unofficial reporting structure, and thus the situation propagates.

Wooooo! That was a lot. Let's summarize that really quick:

- Nathan wants to move up, and knows he can do so by getting information from Sarah
- Sarah wants to move up, and knows she could do so by getting information from Catherine
- Catherine wants to move up, and knows she can do so by providing information to Sarah and Nathan
- Catherine's lack of awareness of what's really going on makes her fail to realize that Nathan is the reason her team keeps getting blocked
- David and Kyle know the reason they keep getting blocked, and blame Catherine for it
- Sarah is using the dynamics at hand to prime Catherine for her own future plays

Meanwhile, senior leadership simply sees that Catherine's projects keep failing, attribute this to a lack of leadership over that team by Nathan's peer, and decide that Nathan is the worthiest of the promotion.

Without remediation, Nathan moves up, Nathan's peer is reprimanded or fired, and the situation repeats itself under Sarah's command. David and Kyle both likely quit soon thereafter and blame incompetent leadership for their complaints.

The broken incentivization scheme here is an issue of visibility. As Nathan was able to assume total control over what his superiors “saw” with regard to his work performance, he could manipulate the situation in order to appear to be the most competent choice for the upcoming promotion cycle. Incentivization schemes like this are easily combatted with “gap-wise 360 performance reviews”, where lower-level employees are able to anonymously report situations like this past their standard chain of command and up to people who can actually do something about the situation. Automated reporting tools that are cleverly designed can also combat these situations as they allow an incorruptible account of the situation at hand.

For this client, the remediation was one of targeted 1-on-1 sessions in which Catherine was made completely aware of the situation, Nathan and Sarah were given better strategies for how to move up, and senior management was given reporting tools to allow them to monitor for issues such as this independent of word-of-mouth reporting.

Information Flow Diagram

The information flow diagram is arranged such that individuals within a given reporting structure are arranged vertically, and those in lateral positions within different reporting structures are arranged horizontally. Individual Topics are denoted in blocks, each of which is defined in the legend at the bottom of the diagram. Darkened topic blocks indicate that that individual is the originator of the information with respect to the group. Information that is distributed from one person to the collective becomes common knowledge.

Requests for information are delivered from and received at the top of a topic block, as defined by the direction of the arrow. Responses are delivered and received at the bottom of the block. An X over the entire block denotes that a given topic is not discussed with a given individual, whereas an X over the bottom of the block denotes a request for information that was not answered.

Informal alliances are denoted with connections between the smiley face icons at the end of each row of topics. Alliances, as with information transfers, can either be “strong” (solid connecting line) or “weak” (dashed connecting line).

In this diagram we encode two individual attributes for each person, and four ways in which information can change as it moves from person to person.

Category: Individual Attributes

With regard to information flow, the individual attributes described are less about defining the individual and more about defining what they hope to accomplish through their transfer of information.

Strategic Intent: Strategic Intent describes the primary focus of the individual in the context of the information under consideration. What are they trying to do with the information? Common intents are High Quality Work, in which the individual is simply trying to gather information to perform their tasks better, and Meet/Exceed Deadlines, where the individual is primarily looking for and removing impediments to the ongoing effort.

Incentive: Incentive describes why the individual has the primary focus that they do. This is primarily an occupational concern in which they are either trying to progress their career, maintain their current position, or prevent issues that could put them or the company in a compromising position.

Category: Information Transfers

As a topic is communicated throughout the group, it morphs based on the perceptions, biases, and intents of the individuals who came before them in the communication chain. Tracking these changes is the key to understanding where communication breakdowns occur.

Clear Transfer: In a clear transfer, there is a negligible change in information quality. This is denoted by a solid or dashed line that has no breaks



Information Spin: When information is spun, the framing in which the topic is presented is changed to appeal to a different group. An example of this would be a hang up in an approval process being explained to an impatient executive as “thoroughly ensuring the quality of the work”. While information spin does usually transfer the relevant facts (in this example, that the work is stalled), the context in which the facts are given is completely transformed. Information Spin changes the transfer from a strong (solid line) to weak (dashed line)



Information Withheld: When information is withheld, a request for information is simply ignored. Withheld information usually causes tension within a group, as those having their requests ignored normally interpret the withholding as dismissive and disrespectful. As withheld information is typically a downward communication issue, it also provides evidence of system in which people are placing a great deal of importance on their organizational rank, viewing those lower in hierarchy as unnecessary to respond to. Information withholding terminates an information flow and leaves the requestors with Xs over the response area of that particular topic.



Information Fabricated: When information is fabricated, the original communication line is completely disregarded and is instead replaced with a new one that the fabricator hopes will prevent them from ending up at fault for the situation at hand. It probably goes without saying, but lying normally doesn't work out for anybody involved, so this is a particularly important discovery in our process. Fabricated information creates a new, strong line of communication that is now colored red, as the information is falsified.

The Analysis in Action - Information Flow Diagram

In this diagram, we are going to take a look at a dysfunctional bureaucracy. Dysfunctional bureaucracies are approval and paperwork chains in which the process has become so standardized that it is now standing in the way of the very purpose it was built for. Names have been changed to protect the identities of the actors and company involved in accordance with our confidentiality agreement. (Note: this is the same diagram that is currently on the DB page of Autonomi website (<https://getautonomi.com/projects/case-study-dysfunctional-bureaucracy>))

Information Flow Diagram: Engineering Team

Issue Identified: Dysfunctional Bureaucracy (DB)

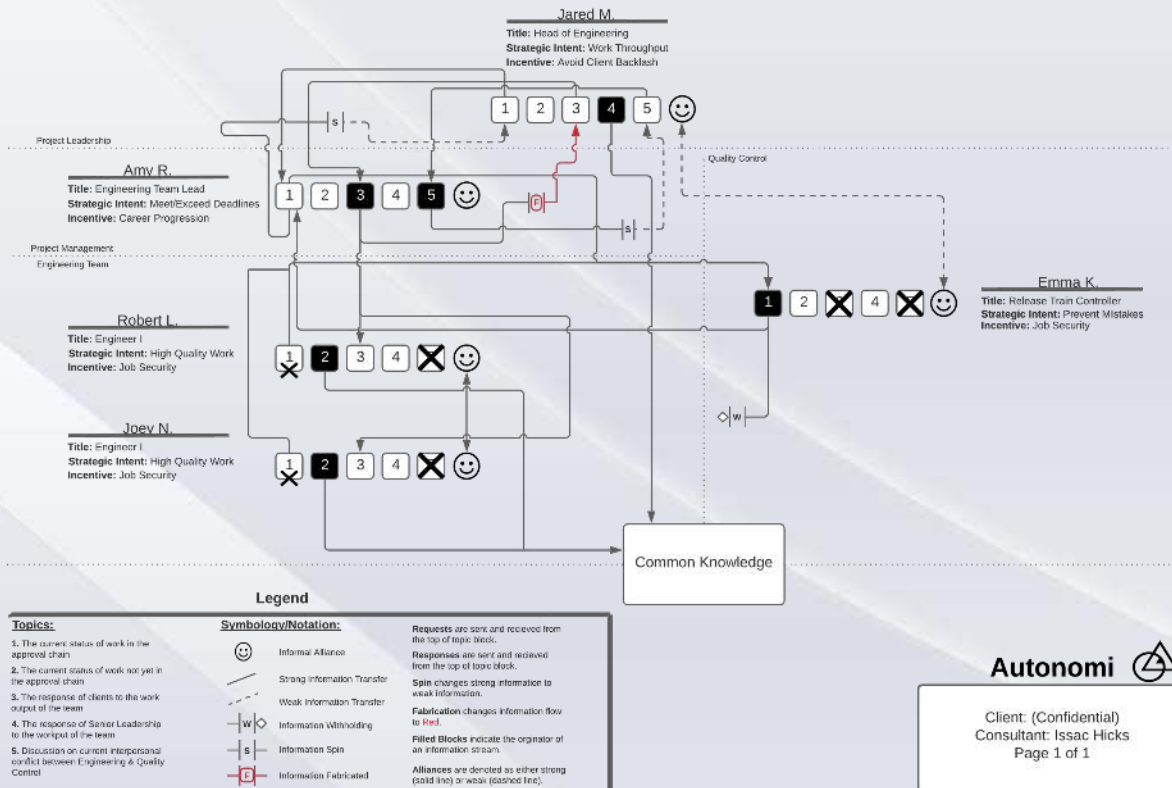


Figure 4: Dysfunctional Bureaucracy - Information Flow Diagram

For this one, let's start with Amy. Amy's primary concern is to ensure that she meets or exceeds the deadlines for the work her team is being given. As such, her and her reports consistently ask Emma for updates regarding the approval of engineering documents sent through to release. Emma, consistently overwhelmed with the task of reviewing documents and pushing things through, simply ignores the engineers. She knows that she has to respond to Amy, so she does, very clearly stating that it is going to take a long time to get everything processed.

Since Amy is looking for a promotion, she wants to make sure she keeps her boss (Jared) as happy as she can. Jared is increasingly concerned about the state of the work from the team, as he keeps hearing from the engineers that the work that is currently in the approval process is critical and can sense that they have a bit of concern about things.

Jared knows better than to add to Emma's workload by reaching out to her about everything, so he turns to Amy, trusting things are handled. In fact, Amy has built her reputation on always having things handled, and Jared knows he can rely on her to make sure that the clients are always happy. He's looking forward to moving her up soon, and she knows it.

Every time Jared asks Amy about the engineer's work, she has a great answer for why it is held up. The project the engineers are working on is very nuanced, and there are many boxes that need to be checked to make sure it is absolutely perfect. A product defect found by the customer could cost the company millions, and that's the last thing anybody wants.

Meanwhile, each ask Amy makes to Emma gets the same response. There is a backlog of about 12 other projects ahead of her team's projects and the executives have told Emma that those projects must be completed first. Amy couldn't possibly relay that directly to Jared and expect to stay in his good graces, so when Jared asks her the same she sticks to her story of nuance. She also tells Jared she has the client expectations managed and they are all in alignment with the wait, when in reality the clients are more and more concerned every day that the company is going to be able to deliver on the work.

Amy is hiding the fact that if things don't change soon, they might even lose one of their largest accounts over it.

As the demands on the team become more intense so too do Amy's demands on Emma, much to Emma's dismay. The communication between Emma and Amy is barely professional at this point, as Amy continues to push and Emma continues to push back. Jared knows that there is tension there, but Amy tells him that it's nothing more than a little friction from the workload and is nothing to worry about.

The engineers themselves? They think the whole thing is ridiculous. Over lunches and inside conversations they joke about how Amy is just digging herself a hole she isn't going to be able to get out of.

The short version:

- Amy is setup to get promoted if she is able to effectively manage the remaining work of her team
- To Amy, Emma is standing in the way of that
- To Emma, Amy is becoming increasingly annoying and wasting her already scarce time
- Jared is being kept in the dark about most of this because Amy wants to save face
- The engineers see the whole thing as a joke and now struggle to take their boss and senior leadership seriously

For this client, the remediation consisted of a revisit of the approval process to streamline and automate many of the quality checks required before roll-out. With less time spent on any particular project, the approval chain was empowered to keep up with the workload of the rest of the organization, and the problem corrected itself.

Final Remarks

Now, after reading all that you are probably thinking something along the lines of:

Wow, that sounds... thorough... Is all of that really necessary?

In most cases, no, it really isn't. Most of the challenges you face can be easily overcome if you are able to allocate more time or money toward them, which is what our intelligent automation services are all about.

But what about when that doesn't work?

No matter how advanced technology gets, the real battleground of business has always been the office. And the thing that truly sets organizations apart, their people.

You can't automate your way into better workplace culture, much the way you can't delegate away the tasks and decisions you know need to be made to move your business to the next level.

One Last Word

Continuously replacing and retraining people is not a good use of capital. Nor is finding new customers when your previous ones will happily buy more work if they were satisfied with their last engagement.

It is always more cost effective to keep people (employees and customers alike) than it is to find new ones.

So if the main thing keeping you from more market share is that you can't find or maintain the right people to keep your business growing smoothly, and you are ready to play a bigger game, our Organizational Dynamics services were made for you.

And if not, Thank you so much for taking the time to read about this very specific service that we offer. Please share this with anybody you feel could use it. There are so many people with bad jobs, and so many businesses are struggling with employee attrition. I just want to help them.

To better business, for all of us,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Issac Hicks", enclosed in a thin black rectangular border. The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line through the middle of the letters.

Issac Hicks