

SOCIOMETRY IN TEAM AND ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT

Diana Jones

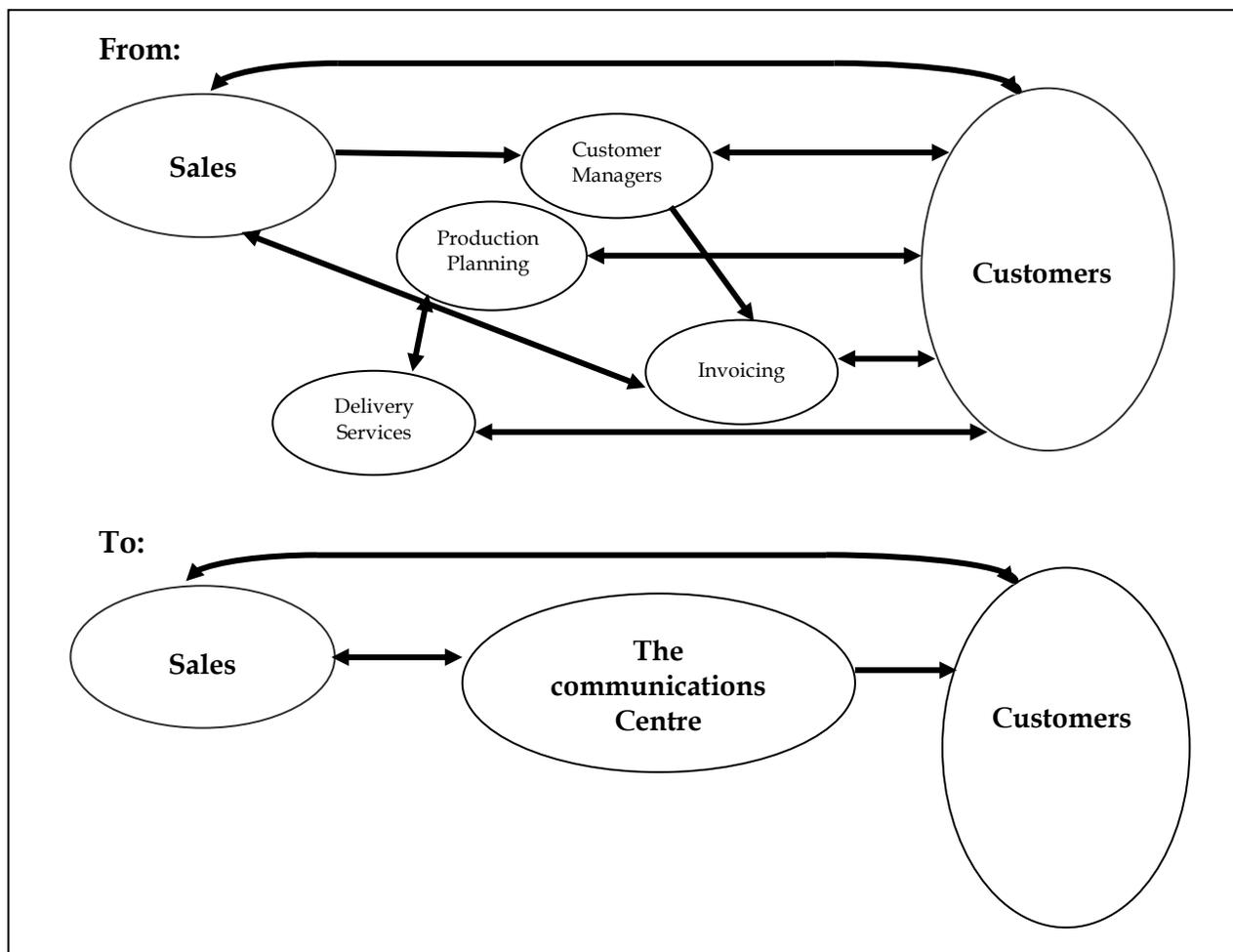
This paper was published in the British Journal of

BACKGROUND

Diana Jones reports on a recent project using sociometry to facilitate the merging of four groups into one, aligned with their new purpose and each other. Diana worked with this company over a three year period, most recently with the alignment of the newly appointed senior executive team.

Since 1988, this company has developed from 20 people to 500. Recently, the company restructured from a regionally based operation to a national structure, with three divisions and four corporate service groups. I have been invited by the manager of one of the divisions to assist him in uniting four distinct sub groups into one communications team. These subgroups comprise seventeen people from four areas: delivery services, sales support, production planning and invoicing. There are three team leaders. The purpose of the new team is to ensure the on time production of jobs by liaising between the company's sales team and the company's customers. In other words, the company wanted closer productive working relationships among different functional groups within the company to strengthen their capacity to deliver to their customers.

Display 1 - The shift in structural relationships: from, to



THE INITIAL MEETING

The new manager lets me know both his hopes and concerns. He has noticed the sub groups are reluctant to get together and he relates a history of frustration, unmet expectations and negativity between the different teams. He reports a tendency for some team members to feel special and others to feel invisible, and this is causing friction. I ask him what outcomes he wants from my working with the team.

The manager refines these and emails everyone a copy inviting their participation.

The results the manager wants from team development

- ◆ “we are a happy and functional team and we want to come to work
- ◆ we cope well with the changes ahead including the shared physical environment
- ◆ we’re comfortable with each other and understand our different responsibilities, and deliver for our internal and external customers
- ◆ we support each other as the new team”

DECIDING TO USE SOCIOMETRY

I am aware some of these people have worked together for a number of years and wonder what is behind the reported negativity and reluctance to get together. I suggest we discover something of the existing network of relationships.

Together, the manager and I come up with criteria likely to warm people up to their relationships with one another, and their purpose in getting together. The criterion we choose is *‘Who in this group can I rely on to help me solve a work problem I might have when we’re in the new team’*.

We decide to make this assessment immediately, and to present the findings in the first team session. This means we can teach team members a model of relationship dynamics illustrating both one way, and mutual relationships, as part of the team development process. I propose we reassess the relationships during the final team session and give those results during a subsequent weekly team meeting. The manager agrees. This approach enables us to make a strong relationship with the newly initiated team meetings, and to integrate the team development process with everyday actions.

THE NEXT STEP

The next step in my intervention is a series of 40 minute discussions with team members to discover more of their thinking, their hopes and their concerns, as they begin to move together. Team members opt into any of the discussions, to a maximum of 4 people so everyone has the opportunity to express themselves fully. I warm people up to their abilities in this session and ask what are some of the skills, experience and attributes they

are bringing to the new team. Within these meetings, each person completes the sociometric assessment on the chosen criteria.

WHAT THE DISCUSSIONS REVEALED

The meetings were lively and open. People expressed five outcomes they wanted from getting together. That:

1. **Our responsibilities are clearly defined** - the grey areas to be defined, especially where it's no-one's job, but it has to be done.
2. **Communication** - we share information versus chasing around trying to get it. Not expecting people to know when they haven't been told.
3. **Relationship with our manager and team leaders** - 'we can raise issues and you are available to us. You don't let problems hang around.'
4. **Qualities in our team** - knowing that I can rely on people to help when I'm overloaded, understanding how we work and what we are like when we are stressed, how to approach us, and vice versa. And, we are a lot of people, we are busy and we rush around - so we do need some privacy and space of our own too.
5. **We address the barriers of 'getting together' so we are no longer 'us' and 'them'.**

The interviews revealed three examples:

- staff physically located upstairs (sales support & production planning) were closer to the managers and had better working conditions than those downstairs.
- those 'upstairs' worked with external customer relationships, and those 'downstairs' related mainly to internal customers. Internal customers were perceived as 'less important'. The delivery services sub group was anxious they'd be the 'slaves', and be 'outside' the team.
- the production planning team reported directly to the national manager rather than to the new centre manager. These people valued highly their separateness and independence and were reluctant for this to change. Others perceived these team members as aloof and unavailable.

These results confirm my beliefs the sociograms would be effective instruments in the team development process.

TEAM DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

To address team members concerns and make an investment in leading people towards the results both they and their manager wanted, I proposed we adopt an approach by working with the team's 'normal' meeting structure. In this way we would reinforce team development as not special or separate. My thinking was this approach would give the greatest chance for building ongoing relationships in the workplace.

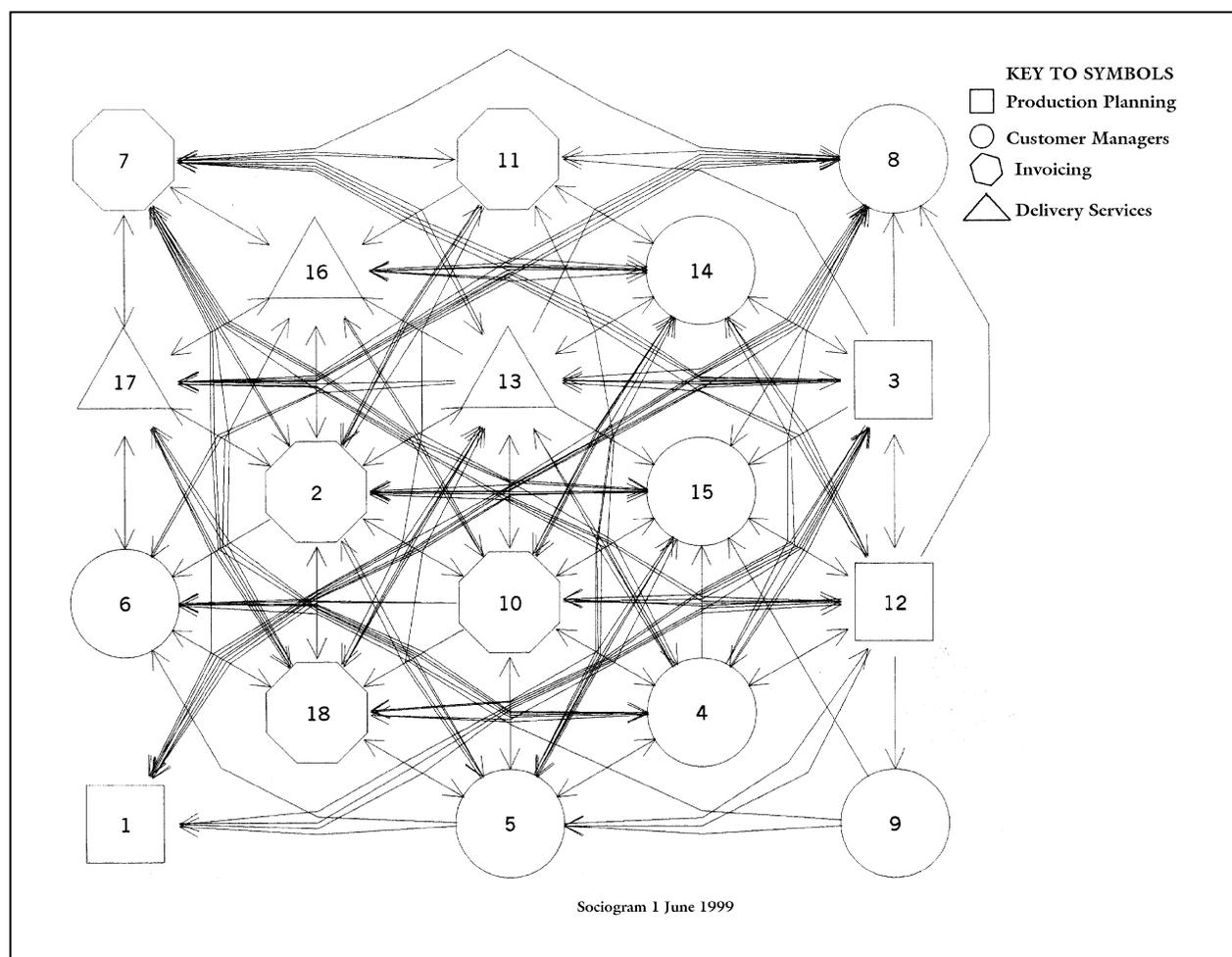
Four half day sessions are proposed. Spread between the first, two weeks prior to the day the teams physically moved together, and the final session three months later. These sessions are to focus on opportunities for developing relationships, enabling communication, problem solving and decision making within the newly formed group, ensuring their concerns are addressed.

REPORTING RESULTS

The manager and I decide to utilise the newly instituted weekly team meeting to report the findings of the discussions and let everyone know of the planned approach. Team members are silent and thoughtful during the presentation. They share their responses firstly in pairs, then into the larger group. Team members are pleased and surprised their concerns are shared. They express relief their comments are not reflected as criticisms of the manager or of each other. They are keen to get underway with the team development sessions.

The results of the first sociogram 1 June 2000

Display 2 - Criterion: 'Who in this group can I rely on to help me solve a work problem I might have when we're in the new team'



The sociogram indicates there are many positive relationships amongst team members. So, already within the group, some team members have a large number of positive problem solving relationships. Some examples: four of the seventeen people have mutual relationships with more than half the group i.e. 9 mutual (two way) relationships.

Others are selective in who they chose: most noticeable are the team leaders. One team leader makes three choices and receives eleven choices. My response, out loud, is to notice a culture existing amongst the team leaders of not seeing problem solving resources available in team members. So while staff see team leaders as responsible for problem solving, team leaders had yet to warm up to this being a shared role.

In the first session the results of the sociogram are given to everyone. In addition, each person is given a readout of the number of choices they made, the number of times they are chosen, and the number of mutual relationships they have. This creates a lot of surprise, delight and interest. Team members warm up to each other, and their relationships, and are excited by what they see. These results confirm what they had been aware of: while they might take a work problem to someone, it is not perceived as a shared problem to solve. It was more perceived as a complaint, so problems tended to hang around.

Together with this information and greater awareness of one way choice, mutual choices and the desirability of mutual choices, (you choose someone to solve a work problem with and that person chooses you), team members become more conscious of relationship dynamics and now have a model for further developing their relationships. And they realise they tend to focus more on what isn't working so well within their relationships rather than what is working well.

A RANGE OF METHODS UTILISED

During the team sessions, a range of psychodramatic methods are utilised including action sociograms, concretising, sculptures, and role reversal. Action mapping is used to create a time line, concretising processes, benefits and pressure points in implementing the new job tracking system. In this way we warm the team up to defining ways they will operate the business as usual, and include new processes.

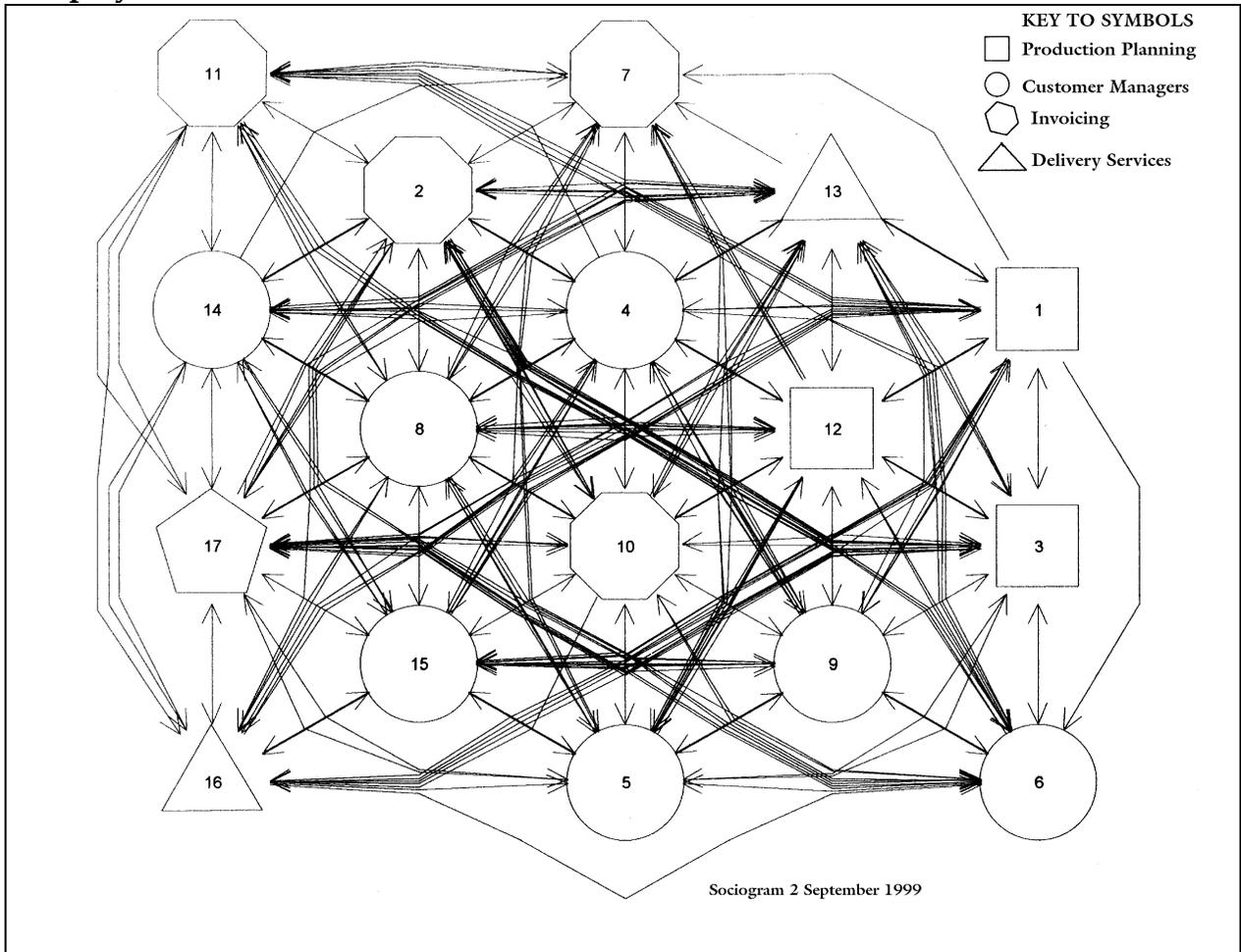
The Myers Briggs Type Indicator enables team members to gain an understanding of their different approaches to problem identification and problem solving, and responding to timelines. Using a systems approach, the manager and I design and present a case study based on a recurring problem facing the group, encouraging team work in finding solutions to every day dilemmas.

I direct an action sociogram to create the seating plan within the work station configuration with team members using the criterion *'who do I want to sit near to, to be my most productive.'*

During the final team development session we make another assessment of the relationships on the criterion "Who in this group can I rely on to help me solve a work problem I have in my work in the new centre".

The new results: Sociogram 2 September 2000

Display 3 -



The results of the second sociogram, results show two key developments. Firstly, 12 group members increased the number of choices they made. Fifteen of the seventeen had more mutual choices than three months earlier. Team members had become more expansive, more flexible in their relationships, were more open to choosing, and were perceived to be more available to others to assist in solving work related problems.

The most compelling results were that 9 people had eleven or more mutual relationships, and 13 of the 17 team members had 9 or more mutual choices within the group.

Display 4 - Comparative sample results over time

	June results			September results		
	Choices made	Choices received	Mutuals	Choices made	Choices received	Mutuals
3. Da Production Planning	Choices made 17	Choices received 6	6	Choices made 11	Choices received 12	10
2. C Invoicing	Choices made 12	Choices received 13	10	Choices made 14	Choices received 14	12
4. Db Customer Manager	Choices made 15	Choices received 8	5	Choices made 16	Choices received 12	12
8. K Team Leader	Choices made 3	Choices received 11	2	Choices made 15	Choices received 15	14
16. M Delivery Services	Choices made 6	Choices received 10	4	Choices made 8	Choices received 14	5

These results indicated two things: a high degree of acceptance of people's different roles and their inter-relatedness and greater willingness to assist each other.

Noticeably, each of the three team leaders had more mutual choices. This result indicated team leaders were more alert to and capable of problem solving with others, and were perceived to be so.

SUMMARY

The underpinning sociometric processes ensured participation was structured around exploring and building relationships and were successful in facilitating a measurable shift in relationships, encouraging team development and enabling the outcomes to be achieved. Participation in the team development sessions greatly assisted team members by providing the opportunity to build relationships and facilitate their availability to assist one another.

As a result of this work, team members became more open with each other and quickly took on the notion of working together, leading people towards the results both they and their manager wanted. The new team were keen to work with these processes with the sales team.

Tom Treadwell's Graphplot was used to produce the sociograms. Treadwell, T. & Saxton, M (1997) Graphplot (online) Available: <http://albie.wcupa.edu/psy513/>

Diana Jones is a sociometrist and TEP, based in Wellington, New Zealand. For over two decades, she has worked as an organisation development consultant and group facilitator in a range of public and private companies. Her special focus is team development with executive teams. Psychodramatic and sociometric concepts, principles and methods form the basis of her work. Diana Jones is on dianaj@orgdev.co.nz and at Box 1441, Wellington 6140, New Zealand*

* TEP is Trainer Educator Practitioner with ANZPA, the Australia and New Zealand Psychodrama Association.