

Operating Principles

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On the surface, operating principles seem to be embarrassingly simple aphorisms that oversimplify the complexity of the person, the intense problems that emotional systems can cause, and are often heard as "sermonizing." Still, they are terribly important and each one is a story unto itself.

The action in a family is so fast and furious it is impossible to analyze each and every situation as if it were a new experience. To treat each situation as if it were different leads to information overload, indecision, endless analysis and paralysis. Operating principles grow out of clinical observations of what works and what does

not work over time, in a large number of families. In total, they form the "I" of a person, his identity, what he stands for and believes. Quite naturally, they are incomplete since awareness is relative and incomplete. I liken them to a person who has a reference library readily available so that he can reach up and pull out one or more principles when called for. In the search for the definition of functional operating principles, one always has the hope of finding universals. These are rare if they exist at all. Some principles seem to contradict others and none can be rigidly applied at all times. Each person must stratify these principles into his own hierarchy so that he knows which comes first and which last. My

clinical experience with people is that they start therapy with many unclear principles, and with little confidence in themselves, although they

For example, respect from others is O.K. If it substitutes for self respect by leading one to

First of a series of articles on operating principles, to be published in subsequent issues of the family. Dr. Fogarty is a member of the faculty at the Center for Family Learning, New Rochelle, N. Y., and is on the faculty also of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine.

may present any issue with a sense of certainty. Months later they have fewer principles, the gray areas of life are larger, and the beliefs they have are firmer, clearer and arranged in a different hierarchy.

In presenting this material, principles have been arranged into somewhat arbitrary categories, to organize them. There is considerable overlap since principles must eventually integrate into a coherent picture. One may be a subtle nuance of the other. They will be related in narrative form rather than listed. As the family is telling its narrative in the office, the fracturing of one of these principles allows for immediate intervention from the therapist. They give him an opening to instruct and restructure.

Triangles

One of the prime principles of family systems is to avoid all triangles. The presence of a triangle ordinarily means that there is some caring-about left in the relationship and that people want to stabilize the situation. If one stays in a triangle, he ends up with an adaptation since emptiness inside of oneself does not emerge. Triangles are attempts at adaptation. After they become fixed, they prevent the possibility of change. As an adaptation, they may indeed defuse a very hot system but they avoid the task of personal re-evaluation. It is impossible to work on an emotional problem as long as there is a triangle covering it. A triangle (in effect) takes the person out of the family and the problem, for all practical purposes, is moved outside the family.

side with one person and against the other, then respect is attained at the expense of the third person. Triangles are avoidance processes that people use to avoid dealing on a one-to-one basis with each other. A threesome is not a triangle if issues can be reduced to the two-person system and if each twosome can deal as a twosome. To avoid this problem, one should take issues to the person they belong to. One is not in a triangle if he can let each twosome deal with its own problems. Clinically, we translate the third leg of a triangle into its equivalent in the twosome and then into the inner system inside each member of that twosome. A mother who says "Father is hard on my son" means that "Father is hard on me and I feel hurt inside." If people can either translate or discuss the issue that is being dealt with around a third person, if they can place that issue between them, then there is no triangle, no avoidance. The third leg of the triangle acts as a buffer between the other two. That third person is not a helpless victim since a triangle demands the active cooperation of all three members. (One of the most powerful positions in the world is the helplessness of a child.) In triangles, there are no victims, only participants.

The third leg of a triangle can be an object, such as cars; or an issue, such as any hypersensitivity that exists in one or both members of a twosome. The hypersensitivity is felt as "truth" but must be seen as "just another" feeling." These very sensitivities, true or false, lead to argument and not discussion. Sensitivities, when activated, tend to overload the system and make any pursuit of a problem at that time futile or destructive. For example, two people can argue about marriage forever whether to maintain it or break it up — and get nowhere. They avoid themselves, their insides and the real problems. When one takes a statement about a third object or person as a personal attack, then the content of the remark is not even heard.

Often sex is used as a weapon, a threat, or release of tension, and becomes the imaginary third leg of a triangle. With problems that are not effectively met, the intensity of triangular configurations increases. The same difficulty is there but distance increases when used as a temporary solution. In a family where mother is over-close to son, and father is distant, the problem in son may become so acute that mother and father get into a "we" position against son. The pressure of increasing distance as a solution causes a realignment of the emotional forces in the

family. Yet the underlying configuration remains the same. Mother is still more sympathetic to son than father. This raises an important point. The language of system is relative. There is a tendency toward, a desire for, and the act, of being in a triangle. I am not in a triangle if I am aware of my part in what is happening and can change my part at will. I am aware and therefore not reactive.

A therapist who sides with one person against the other may be playing with fire but he is not in a triangle as long as he knows that and can believe that the two people deserve each other. If a therapist is going to tinker with triangles and use it as a tool, he must learn to pick out a major triangle in the family, to focus on it and understand its nature. Then he sets up a functional model of a twosome to contrast to the triangle. Movement is then followed and reported to the family around the dysfunctional triangle and the functional twosome. From this will flow a picture of anger, hurt, passivity, attack, pursuit and distance. The objective therapist notes all of this in the back of his head.

Every time there is a problem there will be a tendency to triangle. The therapist can assume, but must eventually check out, that he is dealing with a triangle. The therapeutic assumption is that it is there somewhere, somehow. Therapy, in the long run, is a grand experiment. If you hire the best jockey, your horse is more apt to win. In the face of this, the competent therapist will move to immediately narrow the distances, and distance the over-closeness that is presented to him. This move is not made on the basis of the "truth" that one member of the family has, but on the basis of an overview of the situation. In any given family one is closer, and the other more distant. It is the discipline of the capable therapist that he will move *immediately* to correct that imbalance without knowing more about the family. That is the difference between theory and experience. If there is an affair in the family, one can learn from his "opponent." Wife can learn from mistress and apply that knowledge to herself. Hard, yes; impossible, absolutely not. That reduces the problem to a twosome. Affairs, one of the most common problem that we encounter, can often help in the short run as an adaptation and a triangle but they never work, over time. The hurt is too great and the avoidance of learning to live with oneself is a problem that

cannot be avoided without a huge price. There really is no way, in the long run, to avoid personal re-evaluation. The therapist always has to go back to focusing on the twosome. The two is difficult but it is where the action is. It falls somewhere in between family group therapy and psychoanalysis. Follow who is moving toward whom and who away from whom. The third person, object or issue is a *distraction*—it will miss the point.

The other side of the coin is that the therapist may have such a personal problem himself, or such a belief in his own theory that the theory of the family he sees and his own may become the third leg of the triangle. If one really believes in what he says he believes in, then he can begin to listen to those who see things differently. To do less than that is to muddle in abstractions. In the long run, much "therapy" is an intellectual battle over who has the truth, the pursuit of self interest, and the lack of humility.

Child-centered families represent a clear picture of the emotional "we" that piles one triangle on the other. Behind the "we" there is always a picture of one parent aligned with the child and the other against. Therapy involves a deep appreciation of this overloading and a keen insight into the triangle behind the triangle. A capable therapist will be able to move these forces back and forth to arrive at one or more workable twosomes. This at times may become impossible because outside agencies or therapists (out of the best of motivation) will form a part of that triangle and be immovable. Every therapist will want to take each parent on — one-on-one — to try to prevent triangles at the start. This must be done, but must be done carefully. There are too many variations in beliefs and life styles to approach this task easily. A man will be different with his mistress than with his wife. Each context and each triangle brings out a different part of the self. This sensitivity and limitation must be accepted. Another limitation is time. There simply is not enough time to get into every triangle. One must teach the nature of a triangle from the experience of the patient. For example, after a key child is removed as the issue in the family, that is, removed from the triangle, then one can leap-frog over the other children and move issues and problems into growing up, and the extended family, and connectedness.

Failure, Right, Wrong, Fault, Blame and Fairness

One of the major difficulties in an emotional system is the tendency of people to deal with problems in terms of right, wrong, fault and blame. An emotional system works on function—it either works or it does not work. "Working" is everybody being able to say, over time, that this is a pretty good family to live in. If one person says that there is a problem, then there is a problem.

To accomplish this goal, systems thinkers have had to almost completely eliminate causality. Cause and effect thinking has been used to fix responsibility for the problems and to blame other and excuse self. To avoid this abuse of cause and effect thinking (which is certainly valid), honesty and truth must be redefined. There are very few truths, and those we have are very important. There is little honesty and everyone must realize that he sees life through his own set of lens — no more and no less. Much of what we deal with is a matter of taste, of the set of lens that we are using at that moment. That set of "glasses" was established in the family we came from, for this and against that. To try to impose that on others represents more righteousness and cruelty than understanding. On the surface, this is obvious. Subtle forms of blame exist everywhere. In its subtle form, blame and fault-finding can be done by a look, the raising of eyebrows, the tone of voice, the shift of focus from one point to another. The forms of blame and self excuse are so pervasive that one has to wonder if any of us can avoid them. The conclusion is that unfairness is a part of life. The world is unfair. Nothing you or I can do will make it fair.

If life is intrinsically unfair, what does one make of it? Are all of the causes one fought for — son, daughter, wife, husband and future — all for naught? The self-righteous person will operate on the basis of "what I think, should be." Think about how often that gets into your own head! That may be very affective but very ineffective. Such a family begins to stand on rights; what I should have and what I can get from you. Something is missing. What are the consequences if I exert my rights at this moment? *The exercise of rights never, never has straightened out an emotional problem.* One can make an event good or bad, positive or negative, depending on where you take your reading. Comparisons are then

truly odious. Often there is no other way to do it but to realize the limitations of the method. Comparisons miss the person you are talking to, in therapy or in your own family. That is where the extended family enters. For or against, you and I make comparisons. Think of where that leaves you. Better, worse, up or down, right or left? Does it facilitate closeness?

In the process of having the truth or being fair, details matter very much. The therapist has to listen to them even when his knowledge goes beyond the facts. Otherwise people will believe that they have not been listened to. So change always takes time, lots of time. The other half of the story is that details matter very little. They are often used to establish the fault in the other person. Look at our legal system. Are questions asked to elucidate some matter, or to create a case? The exercise of legality at home is destructive. The details of the form of distance or fusion only matter to the extent that they allow the therapist an opportunity for intervention. People are not to be judged but must be respected. To hear them in the vein of fault or blame is to be destructive. Somehow, the therapist must put "what will work" before "what should be." What will work in the family will lead to a definition of what should be in the family. That is a discipline that few of us hold to. If it should be, then it should be workable. Think of the unrealistic ideas in your own self or your family. The "should, ought to, and could be" — what do they do but lead to expectations that are usually unmet? If something is both reasonably and emotionally "right," it must work in the family, over time.

Emotional systems are totally unrelated to the doctrine of fairness. In an emotional system "should, ought to, fairness, and justice" are a fantasy. The feelings either work or don't work. Unsolicited advice — "I told you so," right, wrong and "tell the truth," turn other people and conversations off. If God wanted us to be right, He would have defined everything so clearly that all people of good will would agree on the "right." He clearly wanted us to think. As therapists, we too must think in family terms. If any move works in the family, by their definition, then it can't be bad or wrong. When faced with a system that is not working, the therapist must provide a framework of the functional and alternatives based on structure, choice, decisions and consequences. And to become reflective, people must experience consequences. There must be

a continuous contrast between righteousness and effectiveness. The real strength of the therapist or a member of the family is to be able to say, "Here is my position, you make up your mind about your position." Self-righteousness always has weakness behind it. "Here is my position and you must agree with me." This is as true of therapy as of the family. How many people get labeled unmotivated or worse because they decide not to enter therapy? Behind self-righteousness there is always unsureness, in therapy and in the family.

Where there are intense feelings of right and wrong, attack and counter-attack, go into the relationship with a member of your family or of a patient with extreme caution. A relationships system that is that hot, full of distance or argument, must be closed slowly, with great patience and sensitivity. Where there has been a separation in a marriage or a child sent away from home, the warning is clear. Narrow the distance gradually despite what people might want to do at that moment. Deal with issues that take the heat away from the point of obvious conflict. If husband is mad at wife, have him deal with that anger in the extended family. That will be less hot and more productive. Yet one must listen to the details of the arena wherein issues are being fought. Otherwise, people will feel that you are not listening to them. They will turn you off. Remember, a message that is not heard is as ineffective as one that is not sent.

Details of any situation are not used to define who was right and who was wrong. They are used to follow the flow of movement and to remove the words "right, wrong, fault, blame, should, ought to, etc." from the language of emotions. Details of a story can obscure following the flow of movement in the family. They lead to judgment. Movement tells us what is happening, what our bias is, and how reasonable one or the other seems. There are times when the therapist will feel that he is wrong if he follows this outline. One or the other story will be so reasonable that it seems unreasonable to go against it. The therapist must be able to accept this feeling of failure and carry a big emotional eraser with him. The only big failure is to not learn from mistakes, and to make them over and over. To help himself, the therapist should express his own "I" position — where he stands at the moment. When someone else comes up with

a value, a belief system, ask how that value developed, from whom it came. That takes one back into the extended family. Values are always influenced positively and negatively by the extended family. In proceeding into the extended family, blame, accusations and self excuses are destructive. They do not add to function. A defense of self is no substitute for a positive "I" position. Attack invites defense and defense invites attack. Never defend self unless in court. Never defend self in the family.

Movement

The most natural and human solution to emotional problems is to set about and gather information. Yet this misses the nature of an emotional system. Emotions move. They move despite reason and intellect and information. Information can literally obscure the flow of movement in emotional terms. Knowledge and understanding without movement is useless. Psychoanalysis has taught us that lesson well. What is the emotional language of movement? Is it to gather endless details about what happened and then someone (the therapist) makes a judgment about it? That is often what people expect. Movement has to do with a different type of language and understanding. One picks up the details to define the movement but then moves issues according to the movement and not the details. A detail would be the fact that husband hit wife. We would all be against that but how about the provocation of the wife who hit him — in her own cruel, emotional way?

Movement has to do with direction, the intensity of the emotional flow. One can move toward the other with love and tenderness. One can move toward the other with anger. Both of these are movements toward the other person. Yet each will be seen differently. There is a difference between the direction of the movement and the nature of such movement — a small but critical difference. The major question is, "Is the movement away or towards?" Because of the expectations of what movement "ought to be," there is often a confusion between the direction of movement and the nature of the movement. The direction comes before the nature.

Another refinement of this process is whether movement is directed toward people or toward objects. People who move toward people tend to get involved with those who move toward objects. Both are equally important. Movement

also has to do with amplitude. This refers to the breadth or range of zest, interest and life in a person. There are many people who look for excitement to stay away from the dark depression inside of themselves. In therapy, they get away from the quest for excitement but always miss it a bit. Their life becomes less exciting, more contented and empty, but not depressed. Universally, they regard this as a major change. Movement, then, has much to do with its nature, the essence of the movement. One can say a very reasonable thing, but in such a tone of voice that quite a different message is delivered. It is common for people to ignore the content of a message, but content is important. All things being equal, the content is the message. It states where the person is and what he believes in. This content can be modified or even negated by the tone, how it is said, the pitch of the voice, or non-verbal gesture, whether it is loud or soft, and the very velocity of the flow of words and gestures.

Some people speak so fast you cannot understand them, and others so fast you can't get a word in edgewise. Others leave empty spaces that are never filled. This rhythm may be regular and consistent, or extremely variable. The rhythm may be resonant and in tune with the other, or abrasive and out of touch. A capable therapist or family member will follow the flow of movement in these dimensions and not get tied into information, bias and details. People generally do better with a flow that is consistent, moderate and without severe ups and downs. The downs are so black they are not worth it.

Problems are often discussed in terms of moving away from something, giving up alcohol, food, a girl friend. Yet one must move toward something if he is moving away from something else. So many people spend their life being against, or moving away from one thing or the other. So few dedicate their life to standing for something and moving toward something. Tracking this flow of movement away from and towards is a critical part of living in a functional manner. Emotionality, then, has to do with both function and movement and not with the reasonable.

In therapy, one must get movement, putting problems in between people and in the framework of that movement. For example, one may go to a movie primarily to see that movie — or

to get away from the family. It is important to define what the primary movement is. To get away from or to move towards. Family theory would indicate that primary movement should be into the family. If one is disappointed with wife, he should move toward children and not girl friend. This way, movement is encapsulated within the family.

Just as molecules move faster and disperse when they are hot, so emotionality heats up the speed of a system until it gets so hot members of the system distance or become paralyzed. When the speed of two people is too fast or too far out of synchrony, they have trouble getting together. One talks and the other does not listen. Emotionality heats up. One way to decrease the speed of movement in a system is to allow empty space for the unexpected and unpredictable. Another way is to always assume that you do not know the other person and to be able to repeat back to him what he has said, rather than trying to answer or defend self. When the speed and amplitude of emotionality flattens out too much, the speed of movement will be slower and there is a tendency to become too reasonable, cautious and obsessed. Somewhere in between there is a calm, peaceful balance where emptiness is experienced without depression and moments of high excitement are less frequent. This sense of inner balance must be verified by following the flow of movement in the external system between members of the family. This lends objectivity to our perception of ourselves.

There is natural flow of movement in every family. This is directed toward function in the family by positive emotional bonding such as caring about each other. It is directed toward dysfunction by negative operating principles influenced by the extended family and the desire for completion — finding the missing piece. When caring-about becomes confused with over-responsibility, the system is in trouble. A keen knowledge of functional operating principles allows the therapist to intervene, tells him where and how to intervene, and redirects this natural flow of movement toward function. Clinically, the therapist follows and teaches to the family the flow of who comes and who goes. Theory is critical for this understanding and then, within the bounds of different movement, he explores the insides and personal relationships of members of the family. People have to examine what their heads are full of while they move.

Many aspects of fusion get in the way and

try to stop new movement. "I can't and he won't let me" are two examples. Nevertheless, the therapist must focus on movement in a functional direction before focusing on issues. Otherwise, therapy gets bogged down in an endless recital of new and old episodes. Start by picking up family movement around areas of intense negative feelings. Functional principles can be introduced as soon as they are identified. Gaps can be filled and transition facilitated by appealing to the natural caring-about in the family. The consequences of not changing, for instance, and common ground such as death. At each new meeting with the family, the first minutes are spent getting a follow-up on movement in the family over the last week. This tells us who will move and who will talk about moving. For example, a pursuer will be the first one to change in the family, and a distancer the last. This puts pressure on the family to initiate movement. After or during a marital separation, find out who is moving toward whom. Separations, incidentally, reflect large distances in relationships and large distances are always a sign of large elements of fusion between people. These distances should be narrowed slowly, sensitively and carefully, to avoid the flaring up of the problems manifested by the distance. Although anger is never useful and generally destructive, there are those people who have to get mad to start moving. In this situation, the anger may be tolerated for the greater good of the initiation of movement. It should never be encouraged. The therapeutic focus on the flow of movement is so accurate that if it is accompanied by symptoms, one can automatically reverse it. As it is changed, one must be sure that it is done according to functional principles. Movement directed toward function is also accompanied by symptoms, but of a different nature. Feelings of emptiness, frustration, disappointment, all experienced within self and seen as a problem in self, are the useful symptoms that accompany change. Eventually, one looks for integrated movement in the family.

In a child-centered family, one pulls mother back from child and she gets in touch with the emptiness inside of herself. She takes this set of feelings back to her father from whom she was distant. Her mother complains about being neglected. In the meantime, father moves toward the child though his natural inclination is to move toward his wife. That is integrated movement: one piece fitting into the other.

Production-oriented families like getting directions on what to do and may pick up movement rapidly. However, they tend to avoid looking *at themselves as they try to change, and* that can be a trap. The therapist must be well grounded in the theory of function in families. At the same time that he has a relatively clear but incomplete picture of what function is, he is tracking the flow of dysfunction in the family. Therapy is the business of narrowing the gap between theory and image.

Optimism and Pessimism

Optimism is the tendency to expect the better rather than the worse. It is an important issue in life. Optimism breeds enthusiasm, and sometimes denial of reality. Pessimism is the credo of the depressed, half-dead individual. Just as people who move toward objects tend to marry people who move toward people, optimists and pessimists tend to meet in some kind of reciprocity looking for balance. Rebellion in the family is accompanied by intense negative "anti" feelings about the other person and can become a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Understanding handles differences in a calm manner and teaches a person to stand for something in himself. It is more for something than against. It is positive and more optimistic because it states that a stand in other is better than no stand at all. Where one is optimistic and the other pessimistic, it is difficult to establish some common ground between them. And yet, some common ground is necessary for the start of negotiations. Therapists must search for these common grounds and it helps the therapist to be optimistic. He must believe in the natural forces of caring-about in the family, that where people remain together there are some positive forces, and that where there is life there is hope. Hope must be based on functional principles and not on desperation, fear and unreality.

The pessimist does not allow time to see the good in a situation. Emotions always like to flow with what comes naturally and the emotionally-oriented person dislikes structure, mistrusts the artificial feeling of a "new" change, and likes to be nature boy. To the emotional person, change is mechanical and being untrue to self, because the "real" feelings are not being expressed. This is a very unreal and pessimistic view of change. Change in the beginning is always unnatural, stiff and uptight. So it is better to be over-optimistic than over-pessimistic.

Deep pessimism takes the life out of people and sometimes leads to hate. And hate destroys the person who hates.

As one proceeds through the change process, his level of optimism about self goes down. In a very sensitive system, it is fine to say negative, pessimistic things about self, but wise to limit remarks about others to the positive, as long as the emotional climate is hypersensitive. Later one can learn how to express feelings so that you are understood, and still not foster negativity in the other. Negative feelings can be expressed by putting them in a foundation of optimism. Criticism can be prefaced by positive statements. This demands a balanced approach since being over-positive can be heard as denial, deceit, and patronizing. Acceptance demands negative feedback in the context of positivity and optimism. It does not mean that other is perfect but that it is human and O.K. to be imperfect.

In therapy it is important to realize that some people defend and define themselves by the image of the negative and the pessimistic. They will tell you what they are not, and what they do not agree with. The therapist cannot rest content with the answer, "I don't believe in such and such." He must ask "What do you stand for?" The seemingly emotional person may appear to be highly emotional because of the expression of dysfunctional feelings of anger and fear. Yet positive feelings of tenderness and humility may be withheld. As real optimism grows, these useful feelings will begin to emerge. For example, people will be able to take a "no" answer to their requests, as well as "yes." They will make an optimistic gamble on the basic goodness of most people.

Sensitivities

Feelings are neither rational nor irrational. They are purely emotional. They are there and have to be accepted as an experience. It misses the point to state that a certain feeling is "unreasonable." Reason and emotions speak foreign languages to each other and don't connect. Nor can feelings be dealt with effectively by sweeping them under the rug. When a feeling develops hypersensitivity it can become disruptive and explosive. At that moment it may be impossible

even discuss it. Every member of the family must develop a knowledge of the hypersensitivities in self and other, and a keen radar system to pick them up before they get out of hand. These hypersensitivities must be desensitized gradually by identifying them and gradually detoxifying them. The therapist must identify them by asking questions such as "How does your wife get to you? If I wanted to get you upset now, how would I do it?" These sensitivities limit the range of a person's life. Knowing consequences helps to desensitize them. If one knows the sensitivities in self and other, he can approach these areas cautiously. We must always be in emotional shape and anticipate trouble. Unfortunately, the sensitive person often gets connected with the self-centered somewhat insensitive person, and this meeting produces mistrust and distance. Sensitivities exist between all people, and inside of them, and can be likened to walking across a mine field.

Members of a family, families, and therapists have to learn to talk to each other to find out what is inside each person. The feelings of a therapist are as important as any member of a family. Unsolicited advice leads to talking at people. The therapist must be interested in the

person and not in changing that person. The least effective way to get change is to try to get it directly. This ignores the sensitivities in people and the importance of their feelings to themselves. Change occurs best in the environment of acceptance. All sensitivities between people represent a systematic overload from other relationships such as extended family, children in the next generation, or the inner system of each person. Clinically, we discover the overview of an emotional problem in a twosome and desensitize it at the same time. This is done by showing how sensitivities in a twosome also exist in other relationships in the family. This takes the personal malignancy out of it. It is easier to deal with someone if we know they treat others the same way. It is not merely me that is being ignored, rejected, etc.

Finally, there are the mind readers who feel they are so sensitive that they can read the motivations and goals of others. Without listening to the other person, they know all about him. They turn off and irritate others around them. When they get good enough at it, they often open up an office and call themselves therapists!