

Introduction to Organizational Energetics

By Warren Bellows and Holly Sidford

Organizational Energetics is a theory of organizational health and development, and related practices of diagnosis and intervention, that enhance the effective functioning of groups and organizations. The Organizational Energetics (OE) theory is based on the natural movement of energy. Because energy is not culturally or linguistically bound, groups from any culture can use this model as a diagnostic self-help tool. The OE model allows groups (and the individual members of groups) to align with natural forces, remedy dysfunctional behavior, and become more balanced and effective in achieving their missions.

The principles of OE work simultaneously on simple and sophisticated levels. Organizations (or groups), like living organisms, need to understand themselves both as whole entities and as collections of component parts. They also need to understand their basic organizational orientation or organizational character, and where they are in the organizational life cycle. OE provides insight into the nature and life stage of the whole organization, and the relationships among and between the whole and its component parts in any given situation. These insights help groups identify symptoms and causes of problems that impede the group's work, and formulate changes that improve efficiency and effectiveness.

Background

The theory and practice of Organizational Energetics was originated by Warren Bellows in 1982. At the time, Warren was Program Director of Merriam Hill Center, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the development of healthy communities and cross-cultural understanding. Merriam Hill provided training to people working in large inter-cultural experimental communities, including Auroville, Findhorn and Arcosanti. Warren believed that Merriam Hill's students would be more effective in strengthening the health and vitality of these large communities if they could comprehend the functioning of the whole system as well as its separate elements, and had tools for improving the communities' natural evolution and the healthy interplay of their component parts. He could find no models that did this. At the same time, Warren had enrolled as a student in the Institute of Traditional Acupuncture. During his first weeks of acupuncture study, he had an insight. Acupuncture is a holistic model that observes and intervenes on all levels of human functioning to effect balance and health. Believing that groups are living organisms, Warren wondered if it was possible to translate the ancient Taoist "Five Element Model" of acupuncture from its actual application on an *individual* as a mind/body system to a metaphorical tool that could apply to a *group* as a mind/body system. If it were possible, it would be the natural model for Merriam Hill students.

Merriam Hill enthusiastically supported the idea of developing this concept. Over the next seven years, the Center sponsored a variety of experiments to refine the theory and practical tools. Warren devised a basic system for Organizational Energetics and trained several classes of Merriam Hill students. Their observations about the communities they visited, as well as their own student groups, validated the OE's usefulness for understanding and "treating" organizational systems. Later Merriam Hill sponsored an OE development group, and in 1986 offered the Organizational Energetics Practitioners Training Program, a year-long educational program for a group of seasoned organizational development consultants and executives. Holly Sidford participated in that Training Program and, along with the other participants, applied the OE model successfully to diverse work situations. This further verified the usefulness of the evolving concepts.

In the past two decades, alternative healing modalities have become more widely accepted, and – unlike 20 years ago – acupuncture is now recognized as a valid medical model in the US. Organizational development theory has also evolved, and systems theory now informs leading practice in organizational and business development. We believe that the culture at large and organizations in general may be more open to the OE model than heretofore, and we are dedicated to re-introducing it – first to innovative leaders in the nonprofit cultural sector and, if that is successful, subsequently to innovators and leaders in other sectors.

The Theory

According to Taoist belief, all things in this manifest world are in various stages of change at all times. Achieving and sustaining the health of any system – be it an individual, group, organization, nation or ecological system – is a function of understanding the laws of change and applying them in everyday situations. The Taoists, being naturalists, learned the laws of change through empirical observation. They saw no separation between humans and nature, and they understood that the laws of change that govern nature also apply to humans and their communities (groups, organizations, nation-states, etc.).

What are these laws and how can they help us understand and manage groups and organizations? Four are most important:

I. Yin/Yang: The Law of Interaction Between Complementary Opposites

All observable phenomena are caused by the interaction of complementary opposites. For example, our observation of day (yang) is enhanced by understanding night (yin). Hot (yang) is best understood in relation to cold (yin). The Male (the active, visible, downward force according to the Taoists) is enhanced by juxtaposition with the Female (in Taoism, the receptive, invisible, upward force).

There are several ways this law of opposites is demonstrated in the life of a group or organization. One of these is the dialectic interplay between content and process. “Content” is the yang aspect of a group. It is the visible dimension that is concerned with what the group is saying and doing at any moment. “Process” is the yin aspect of the group. It is the less visible dimension that is concerned with how the group is developing as an entity while accomplishing its (yang) tasks. Both yang (content, doing) and yin (process, being) are fundamental ingredients for the health and success of any organization or group, and understanding the difference between content and process is essential to the successful functioning of any group. To be effective, the group (and its managers) must know how to address both content and process, and maintain the balance between them.

The birth of any entity is initially realized through the primary interaction of yang and yin. Just as we need both male and female to create a child, so too we need the yang energy and the yin energy to create a group. The yang energy is the inspiration, the vision. The yin energy is the nurturing ground or supporting medium that enables the vision to become reality.

For a birth to occur – be it the creation of an organization or group, a new program or product, or a social movement – there must be both vision and support, and both must be appropriately activated and balanced. An individual starts with a very strong vision of a new possibility. He or she then enlists others to share the vision and work to make it a reality. The visionary is the yang aspect of the group and, ideally, maintains the purity of the vision and ensures that it “descends” correctly into reality. The supporters (co-workers, funders, other enablers) are the yin aspect of the group, receiving the inspiration and contributing resources to make that vision manifest in the world.

It is important to know who “owns” the vision of any enterprise. Confusion in groups occurs when there is lack of clarity about who owns the vision, and this can lead to struggles over leadership and authority as the group develops. The visionary will always be the propelling force unless he or she explicitly accepts modifications to the vision through the input of others in the group, thereby creating a mutually-agreed vision. Let’s take a hypothetical case – a visionary with the goal to re-forest a section of denuded land. The visionary articulates the idea, and attracts others to the cause. Things move smoothly at the beginning, but then a struggle for authority arises. The visionary wants to plant only oak trees; the members of the group want to plant pines and cedars as well. Who is in charge here? The “content” of the struggle may be about which trees to plant, but the “process” is about who owns the vision, who has the authority to make decisions, who speaks for the whole, etc.

Unless the group shared the visioning process, the visionary is the leader and his/her vision must prevail. The only way the visionary can cease to be the leader is to actively reformulate the vision in concert with others (which can feel like a kind of death to some visionaries). If the group can re-formulate the vision collectively, and clarify roles, functions and structure for the members, it can proceed. If not, the group will break up, losing its leader and the vision at once. It is essential to honor and respect both the yang and the yin aspects of the group, and to facilitate their interaction as the entity forms and develops.

II. Energy: The Law of Movement and Change

Energy behaves according to unchanging laws:

1. The nature of energy, the life force, is to move and change.
2. If left unimpeded, energy will move in a natural, progressive and predictable way.
3. “Illness” or dysfunction in a system is a manifestation of energy being blocked or hampered in its ability to move in its natural progression.
4. If blocked in its natural progression, energy will either stagnate or find another path to move, which usually creates disruption in the system.
5. All parts of a system affect the whole system in a specific way.
6. A symptom may not be, and usually is not, the cause of the illness or dysfunction.

III. Evolution: The Law of Phases

All life and all systems evolve in phases. The Taoists describe five phases and call them the Five Evolutive Phases, or the Five Elements. Each phase gives birth to the succeeding phase and, as such, the cycle of evolution is called the generative cycle. The five phases are:

I. Water or Winter Phase.

In this phase energy is gathered together to create a resource for the life cycle of whatever is being born (a person, a meeting, an art project, a group or organization, etc.). This energy is like water in that it is amorphous, flowing, and tends to go down and deep. The energy is like Winter in that the life force, although alive and well, is hidden and deep in the Earth. In humans, this is the energy of the earliest stage of life – an embryo to two years. In a group, it is the phase immediately following the combination of yang and yin forces. During this phase, a group will deal with issues of purpose, direction, membership, defining assets and acquiring resources, and related topics. The emotions associated with this phase are courage and its opposite, fear. The politics of power are a constant sub-text, and staying healthy through this phase is likely to demand great clarity regarding vision and mission.

2. Wood or Spring Phase.
In this phase, energy becomes visible – it's the sprout that emerges from the buried seed. Wood energy is fast and rushing, taut and wiry. It is the energy of growth and visibility, the energy of Spring. In humans, this is the energy of a person between two and 12. During its Wood phase, a group will deal with issues of identity, goals, structure and strategy, roles and responsibilities and how to make decisions. The emotional tenor of this phase will be hope and/or anger, and staying balanced is likely to require vigilance regarding organizational structure and authority.
3. Fire or Summer Phase.
In this phase, energy becomes very expansive. Like Summer, the Fire energy is warm, blossoming, open and fun. This energy is about relationships of all kinds, and it fosters expansiveness and experimentation. In humans, this is the energy of people between 12 and 40. In groups, the Fire phase will deal with issues of coordination (both internal and external), contracts, communication, and team-building. The emotion of Fire is joy (or the lack thereof) and the primary challenges to maintaining balance in this phase revolve around good communication.
4. Earth or Late Summer Phase.
In this phase, energy becomes more concentrated, and round like the Earth. Late Summer energy is concerned with harvesting and holding, and nurturing the whole. This is the time of reaping previous experience, achieving compassion for oneself and others. In humans, this is the period between 40 and 60. In groups, this phase is characterized by issues of productivity and service, stability, effective management of resources, routinizing systems, maximizing the assets and talents of the group and the company. The emotional tenor of this energy is compassion, satisfaction and sympathy (or their opposites), and maintaining health during this phase involves clarifying the needs of the whole group and improving the smooth operation of all systems.
5. Metal or Autumn Phase.
Metal energy is very refined, sharp and crisp. This is the energy of distillation, evaluation and refining, of letting go of all that is not essential and taking in only that which will be helpful to making it through the Winter. In humans, it is the period from 60 to death. In groups, the Metal phase deals with issues of meaning, evaluation, quality and evolving to the next stage of purpose and effectiveness. The emotions associated with Metal are inspiration and grief. The work of groups in this phase centers on clarifying values and standards, pruning that which is unessential, and preparing for transition to the next stage of growth -- which is the Water Phase.

Like each individual person, each group or organization has a basic personality or orientation shaped by its core purpose and function. A financial institution or bank (Water) has a different character than a funeral parlor (Metal); a public relations company (Fire) has a different character than an automobile production company (Earth). While every group moves through the five phases of development, the characteristics of the organization's fundamental energy are an important context for understanding the group's behavior. Similarly, the prevailing concerns of a given group are likely to be related to its evolutionary stage. A group that is new (less than a year or two) will have different preoccupations than an organization that is 40 years old or older.

To become a functioning entity, every group or organization must go through the five stages of development, but the timing of this evolution can differ from group to group. A group of volunteers working on a political campaign may have only a few weeks to develop healthy

functions related to purpose, structure, communication, production/delivery and evaluation. A new nonprofit dance company may take months or years to put all its functions in place. Once a group has moved through the developmental cycle once, however, all the functions of the five elements are activated and will affect the health and vitality of the whole.

Helping a group or organization evolve means helping the group traverse the Five Evolutive Phases with knowledge, grace, resilience and good humor. Any group leader or group member benefits from knowing what phase a group is in; knowing the essential work of each phase and the values associated with it; and knowing the most appropriate interventions that will aid healthy passage from one phase to the next. This knowledge assists the group in completing its work effectively and diagnosing dysfunctions accurately. It also helps the group distinguish presenting symptoms from root causes so that interventions will treat the fundamental problem(s) and not superficial behaviors. In nature, a dry Winter will present water problems in Spring and throughout the year; similarly, a poor harvest in Autumn will mean a long and hungry Winter and Spring. In groups, a deficiency (or excess) in one phase will manifest itself in all subsequent phases. Understanding and achieving balance in each elemental phase leads to greater health and effectiveness of the group long-term, and overall.

IV. The Twelve Functions: The Law of Functional Relationships

The Taoists refined the Five Evolutive Phases by describing 12 specific functions, or organs, which enable a human organism to operate during every phase of life. The Taoists called these functions “Officials.” Each of the 12 Officials is concerned with different functions of the individual on four levels – body, emotion, mind and spirit. Each Official is responsible for a specific organ in the body and also embodies the qualities of one of the evolutive phases. For example, one function is called the “Official of Evolution and Change.” The organ attached to this function is the Large Intestine and it embodies the qualities of the Metal or Autumn phase.

Thinking figuratively about the function of the Large Intestine and the qualities of Metal or Autumn, we can see that the business of this Official is not only the smooth operation of eliminating that which is no longer useful (the work of the colon), but also the search for trace minerals to reabsorb into the body and the extraction of water from waste. “Searching for trace materials” is a metaphor for the work of the Metal phase – the activity of the body, emotions, mind and spirit all seeking that which is of utmost value and meaning to the organism’s health and well-being. It implies that the organism knows what is valuable, can evaluate any given resource or situation to determine what is valuable, and can absorb what is valuable to enhance its quality of life. In a physical body, this function operates both actually and metaphorically on the emotional, mental, spiritual and physical levels.

In an organization, too, the function has effects on the emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical dimensions of the group. In a group, this function is manifest in standards and mechanisms for determining what to sustain and what to eliminate. In a healthy group, the standards are clear and the process of determining what products, people and processes to keep or eliminate operates well. The group has a sense of self-worth and knows it is doing meaningful work; it is able to adapt and let go of ideas, programs or activities that are no longer useful to its purpose. Such a group is likely to demonstrate a crisp, efficient energy, and its resources – people, information and other assets – are valued and deployed in a clear and well-organized way. In a group that is “unhealthy,” these standards and processes are not clear and problems related to these issues arise repeatedly and – sometimes – disruptively. We have all been in such a group and we know the symptoms: new programs are added without eliminating outdated ones, personnel is retained even when their skills

don't fit the evolving work demands, ineffective internal systems are retained because "it's too hard to change." Such an organization is likely to have a bloated, lethargic quality; its staff may be dispirited and lack a clear sense of organizational values; and the offices may be literally cluttered and disorganized.

Letting go of that which is no longer useful is one of the hardest tasks for any group, yet it is mandatory if the group wishes to maintain its health and continue its evolutionary development. Letting go of too much -- in a sudden downsizing of staff, for example -- can disrupt healthy growth. But not letting go will overload and "constipate" the system.

As noted above, each phase leads to the next phase. The Metal (Autumn) phase leads to the Water (Winter) phase. The Water phase leads to the Wood (Spring) phase. In an evolving group or organization, it is important to know the natural progression of change and the work required of each evolutionary phase. Skipping phases or performing them perfunctorily will lead to problems later. In an explicit change process (during strategic planning, for example, or the transition from one leader to another), it is especially important to know what to keep that is of utmost value (Metal), which will be a resource for the next phase of growth or re-creation (Water).

Application

Two graphs representing the five phases and the 12 functions are attached. The first describes the core issues and activities of each of the Five Evolutive Phases – the primary work that must be accomplished in each phase. The second graph describes the core activities of the 12 Officials (organs) and shows their relationship to the Five Evolutive Phases and to each other. In both graphs, all aspects of the system relate to all other aspects of the system in a unified manner. The arrows in the graph show the relationships of each phase or function to the others.

It is beyond the scope of this introductory paper to describe in detail all the ways in which the Officials and the Five Evolutive Phases interact. The graphs, however, can serve as simple diagnostic tools for those seeking a preliminary way to apply OE theory. In diagnosing a group's health, the reader may review the functions described in the first graph, and see which are operating well, which are not operating well (either because they are being under-performed or over-performed), and which seem to be missing altogether. For example, is the purpose of the group clear? Are its boundaries well defined? Is it effectively generating the resources it needs, and are its members well-motivated? (Water functions) Is the structure of the group clear? Are its strategies for accomplishing its purpose well-defined? Are there proper controls for guiding activity and growth? (Wood functions) The relative strength or weakness of the function will suggest what actions may be necessary to promote greater health, balance and effectiveness.

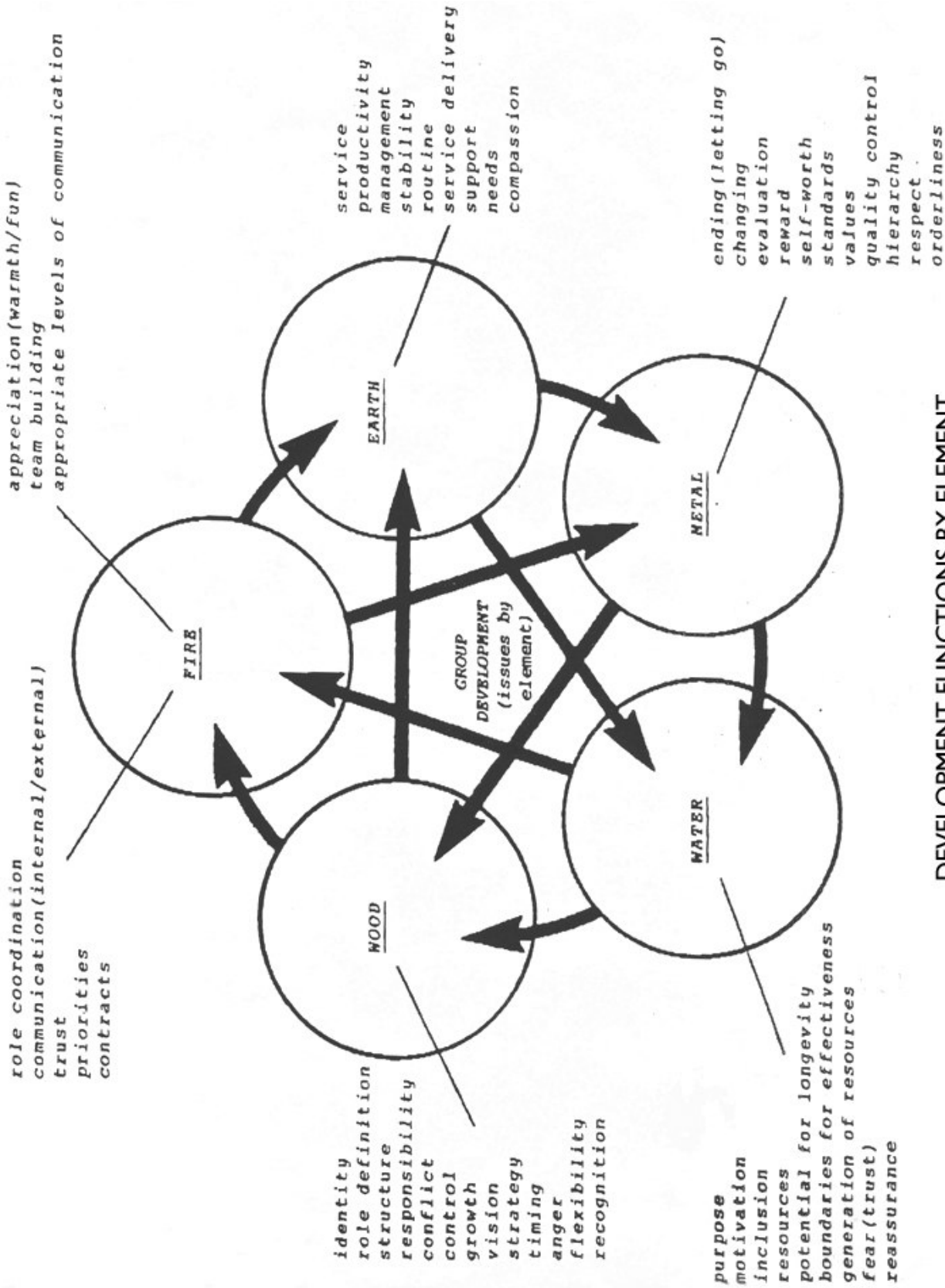
One way to use the second graphic tool is to identify a problem that the group or organization is having and work that through the model. For example, a group may be experiencing problems with planning (associated with the Wood phase, and Official VIII, the Liver). This problem could stem from any of several sources (as suggested by the incoming arrows). Does the difficulty with planning stem from the group's inability to clarify issues and make decisions (associated with Official VII, the Gall Bladder – connected to the Liver function within the Wood element)? Or does the difficulty arise from the group's lack of motivation and energy or its ability (or inability) to generate resources (functions associated with Officials IV and III, the Kidneys and the Bladder, in Water)? Or is the group unable to plan well because it cannot evaluate existing conditions, clarify its values and determine what should be taken forward and what should be left behind (functions associated with Officials IX and X, the Lungs and the

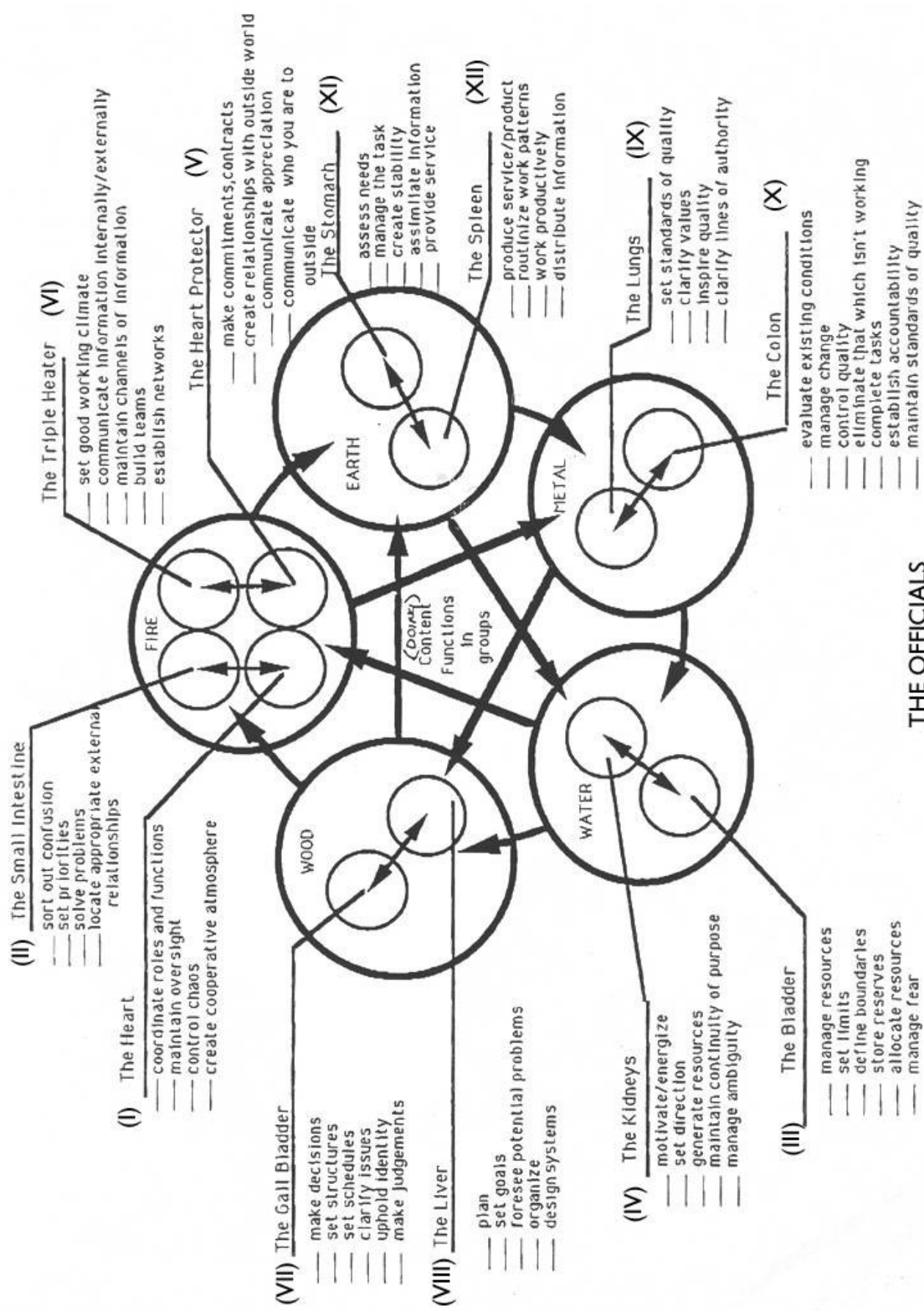
Colon, in Metal)? The answers to such questions help the group analyze the root dysfunction, and suggest the place where an intervention or change will have the greatest positive impact.

Conclusion

Diagnosis is more art than science, and there are many diagnostic systems available. Organizational Energetics is distinguished from other organizational theories and diagnostic practices by its comprehension of the whole system and the way its component parts relate and interact because of elemental laws of nature and the movement of energy. In addition, because OE's approach is metaphoric and uses natural images and analogies to describe group systems, it stimulates right-brain solutions to problems that sometimes defy even the best of left-brain analysis. If one understands the laws of energy, one can discover where energy is blocked. Once the block is discovered, it can be removed. And once the block is removed, energy will flow in natural ways that promote health, balance and longevity for any living system.

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THE OFFICIALS

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