Assessing Systems and Processes in Organizations

Anita Mountain and Chris Davidson

Abstract

This article outlines the application of the assessment-analysis-action model (the 3A model) and three-dimensional OKness to create clear contracts and interventions. The key theme of the case study with a youth offending service team concerns the development of a clear identity within a merged organization based on OK relationships.

Working for the Youth Offending Service

Since 2000 we have worked for a youth offending service (YOS) in a very deprived part of England. These local-level services were established nationally in the United Kingdom in April 1999. The top priority of the youth justice system is to prevent children and young people from offending in the first place. Failing that, its job is to discourage those who do offend from reoffending.

We were brought in to facilitate the development of the new service. This was important because youth offending services are drawn from a variety of agencies: social, health, a youth employment agency, probation, and police, each with their own culture, structures, and systems. Our initial contract was to develop a cohesive team with a shared identity and culture. The aim was to enhance delivery of service to the target groups outlined by the Home Office.

At the commencement of our contract with the youth offending service team described here, the staff numbered 20. There are now nearly 80. The job of the YOS teams includes the following core functions:

- Assessment of young people who offend
- Help and direction to change their behavior
- Encouragement to compensate the victims of their crimes
- More full involvement of parents in the youth justice system

Assessment with the 3A Model

To be able to assess the situation within the YOS, we used the assessment-analysis-action (3A) model. Before we tightened up the contract with the head of service, it was necessary for us to assess what was, and is, happening in the organization. As consultants we needed to take into consideration the fact that, as soon as we are involved, we influence the dynamic, just as new staff make a difference to the organizational dynamic.

The 3A model (Figure 1) can be used for diagnosis where the issues might be within an organization and thus where the primary interventions need to be focused. The model enabled us to decide where we needed to start and then what to address with the YOS.

Figure 1
The Assessment, Analysis, and Action (3A) Model
At the top of the model are the organizational goals. All organizations require goals, this being the primary purpose for which they are set up. The YOS goals were outlined earlier in this article, but for commercial organizations, these goals might include making a profit and ideally producing quality goods while being an excellent supportive employer. All departments and areas within the organization will need to be working toward the same goals so that efforts are maximized. Therefore, establishing the organizational goals will be the first task. The values will then need to be established so that those within the organization are clear about the nature of the processes they will need to use to move toward the goals.

In this model, the base circle outlines the organizational values. These need to underpin the culture and processes within the organization and are hence drawn underneath the rest of the organizational diagram. At the same time, all organizations are influenced by external forces (e.g., the marketplace if selling commodities, the community within which the organization operates, and government initiatives, interventions, and legal requirements). These influences will include interest rates as well as new government guidelines as in the case of the youth offending service. Hopefully, the value systems of those influencing the organizational are congruent with those of the organization itself. Where this is not the case, difficulties are likely to ensue.

These influences can be developmental as well as detrimental. Too many new initiatives and demands by central government or by any central headquarters can place such a burden on employees to meet these demands that they become overwhelmed, stressed, and eventually leave due to an inability to keep up with the pace of such demands. Therefore, it is important to undertake an assessment on the nature of these influences and how they are affecting the organization. For example, are the following areas on the increase?

- sickness levels
- disciplinaries (which may indicate that individuals are being pushed beyond their limits leading to a deterioration in their behavior)
- low morale
- low levels of stroking
- staff turnover

As shown in Figure 1, sandwiched between the underpinning values and the goals are the day-to-day processes that make the organization actually run. In the center of the diagram is the organizational purpose and identity. This purpose is obviously linked with the goals and the identity with the values as well as the purpose. When this area is clear, it will be easier to develop those areas diagrammed around it. For instance, the YOS with which we worked had clear goals and needed to develop a common value system. For example, should they take a young person back to court if he or she broke the bail conditions? Originally, some workers said they should, while others said they should give youth offenders another chance. These differences were due to workers coming from various agencies, each of which had its own value system. To establish a clear identity for the new youth offending service, staff needed to discuss these issues and develop a consensus so that they could move forward on the basis of what was right for the YOS rather than in terms of what was right for their parent agency.

Having developed clarity about purpose and identity, the organization can then explore what resources they have, how these can be increased, and what structures and systems need to be in place to enable the organization to run smoothly. The style of leadership will need to reflect the value base as well as the purpose and identity of the organization. Is there a predominant style or are leaders flexible depending on the situation? Do they use coercive, controlling, coaching, or participative styles of leadership (Krausz, 1986)? Are leaders empowered to make decisions, or do they look to the managing director, head of service, or someone else to make the decisions?

In terms of relationships, are they cooperative or detrimentally competitive? How are difficult relationships dealt with? Is there a willingness to resolve conflict? Is there a sense that relationships are artificial, with a lack of trust, or genuine, with a sense of autonomy and yet recognizing the interdependence of everyone within the workforce?
All of these areas make up the organization. Joining them in Figure 1 are the arrows that represent the energy force or physis. This force also runs up the center of the organization. When morale is low, if there is a lack of recognition, or leadership strategies are detrimental, then this energy will not flow. It is our job as transactional analysts to enable the workforce to redirect any energy currently being used negatively toward positive, constructive ends. This way morale and productivity are likely to increase.

Returning to the YOS, to assess the current situation within the youth offending team and to develop relationships with staff members, each member of the team was interviewed. This was particularly important as one of the consultants had known the head of service through work in his previous local authority. The initial interviewing was thus necessary to ensure that psychological distance was minimized (Micholt, 1992).

Mountain’s diagram (Figure 1) can be used to assess where the focus of an intervention needs to be in the organization. Among the questions we asked were:

- Is the purpose or identity clear here?
- Are there clear values and a philosophy?
- Are these expressed and widely shared?
- Are all aspects of the structure congruent with these?
- Do all aspects of the structure have shared goals?
- If not, what are the leadership strategies to ensure that everyone is pulling in the same direction?

Following the assessment interviews, we commenced a series of team development days. One of the consequences of the service being multi-agency was that there was conflict and confusion over team identity. Each staff member appeared to be attempting to hang on to the way things were previously done in their respective agencies. Therefore, one of our first tasks was to enable the staff to move through the transition phase into becoming part of the new service. This also involved discussion of the various value systems so that one cohesive value base could be established that would enable development of a clear identity.

During this transition phase we also needed to support the staff in coming to terms with being in a new organization that did not have the systems and structures all set out and sorted. For some this was exciting, while others felt confused and frustrated.

As the service grew to its current size, other issues came to the fore. The increased size dictated that the service address how to break down into effective working groups while the service as a whole continued to remain flexible.

Development days were used to consult staff and receive feedback on the current structures and systems. In this way the staff could experience being heard and acknowledged both for their experience and skill as well as for their emotional experience of being within this system and how it was working for them.

At first there were three managers within the service, and they were offered six sessions of coaching. Later, with the growing size of the management team, we undertook an introductory leadership program aimed at developing the “team” as well as increasing skills and knowledge.

All work undertaken continues in close liaison with the head of service and through staff consultations prior to the development days.

The use of the 3A model enables us to keep our focus as consultants. The influence of the government guidelines and different acts of Parliament were the primary movers of the YOS’s direction. This fed down to the youth justice board, to local management boards, and onto the YOS. Later various consultative groups were to be established within the community that would also have their influence on the service.

Clarity about the influential bodies needed to be kept in mind when making the assessment because this influenced the culture and dynamics. Table 1 outlines our initial assessment based on the 3A model.

After we finished our assessment and analysis, we were then able to contract with the management team about how we would proceed. We wrote a proposal outlining that since they were a new service, it was important to ensure that the values and philosophy of the organization were clear and widely shared. This would offer a common bond and be a starting point.
for establishing policies and procedures for the work they needed to undertake. It was also one way in which we could enable the YOS to establish an identity and also provide a solid foundation for this development. The purpose of the service was, and is, at its simplest, to reduce crime and recidivism. However, a clear identity did not come automatically. Tensions were created through staff frequently referring back to “the way we do it in . . . is . . .”

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASPECT</th>
<th>ASSESSMENT</th>
<th>INTERVENTION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Influences</td>
<td>Government fed down to youth justice board and then to local management boards</td>
<td>Acknowledge and encourage awareness of what they can influence, control, and not control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values and Philosophy</td>
<td>Lack of agreement about values in relation to some aspects of the work (e.g., breaching or being recalled to court after failing to abide by bail conditions)</td>
<td>Undertake discussion on values and move to resolution so that they can develop clear value system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose and Identity</td>
<td>Purpose clear but identity fragmented as each agency referred back to its previous parent agency</td>
<td>Develop a congruent service through the understanding of logical levels; build on administrative need for YOS forms rather than reference back to how each worker had done it before</td>
</tr>
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<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Fragmentation of value systems and methods of approach to certain aspects of the YOS work leading to less effective relationships</td>
<td>Enable staff to value diversity within the team and find ways to work together using each other’s strengths, skills, and areas of expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Strategies</td>
<td>Apart from the head of service, lack of leadership skills</td>
<td>Leadership course for newly appointed managers as well as the original group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structures and Systems</td>
<td>Constantly changing as the service grew and problems and issues were identified</td>
<td>Keep this on the agenda for development days and involve staff in discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Financial resources growing as government initiatives abounded; head of service’s role in locating and using extra funding continued to grow the service</td>
<td>[No intervention made in this area]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>Government goals expressed and caused pressure because they were frequently being updated and added to</td>
<td>Acknowledge changes and enable YOS to find ways to develop their own goals within the bigger picture</td>
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Within the 3A model we used a variety of transactional analysis concepts in each section to enable us to assess what was happening in each diagrammatic segment. One of these was the competence or change curve (Hay, 1992). This concept enabled people to make sense of their experience and to realize that their feelings and experiences were not idiosyncratic; it also provided a model managers could use to support their teams.

Another model we used to understand what was going on in the service was the 3D model of OKness (Davidson, 1999), which was very pertinent to this multiagency service.

**Using the Model of 3D OKness**

The 3D model of OKness was, and still is, relevant to the YOS. Staff members from each of the contributing agencies had a tendency to express themselves in ways that could, for example, have been interpreted as “I’m OK (because I’m a probation worker), You’re OK (because you are a police officer), but They’re Not OK (because they are from the social services).” If left unaddressed, this sort of thing could have led to a fragmented service and a lack of a cohesive identity.

No relationship exists in isolation. All of our interactions with one or more people take place in a variety of contexts: families, friendships, communities, teams, organizations, society, and, increasingly, the global community. People may view themselves and others as OK in one context but not in another. To assess multidimensional OKness, a three-dimensional model developed by one of us (Davidson, 1999) was used.

Berne (1972/1975, pp. 90-91) made brief mention of three-handed OKness. However, those ideas have been largely overlooked over the years, with the exception of Summers and Tudor (2000) and, in a specific context, Jacobs (1987). OKness can be seen as the way in which I value and feel comfortable with myself, you, and others (adaptation of Novey as cited in White, 1994, p. 271).

Ernst (1971) developed the OK Corral, which shows the four basic positions we can occupy in terms of the way we view ourselves and others (Figure 2):

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**The OK Corral**

*Figure 2*

The OK Corral (Ernst, 1971, p. 231)

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The OK Corral can be extended to include a third person or persons (Figure 3):

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**Figure 3**

Three-Dimensional Diagram Showing Relationship with the OK Corral (Davidson, 2004)
Each OK Corral position has two related three-dimensional positions. The importance of the third dimension can be shown by the contrasting nature of the two positions in the top right-hand corner. Although both spring from “I’m OK, You’re OK,” they are very different. If we remove the OK Corral squares from the center, we end up with a square consisting of the eight wedges making up the eight three-dimensional positions. These have been abbreviated using the shorthand “+” or “-” (see Figure 4).

![Figure 4](image)

**Figure 4**

Fully Developed Three-Dimensional Diagram (Davidson, 2004)

These positions can then be diagrammed by the triangles extracted from Figure 4 and numbered in sequence. These will, for the moment, be viewed from the standpoint of a new YOS staff member; examples could, of course, be generated from the standpoint of anyone else in the staff member’s world. (In the abbreviated notation, “I,” “U,” and “T” stand for the positions, with the plus sign signifying “OK” and the minus sign “not OK.”)

When working with employees, we usually use green lines to signify the OK-OK-OK position and red lines for all of the other positions, since they involve at least one of the corners being not OK. This “traffic light” analogy is a visual reinforcer that helps people recognize the ideal position from which to work. We use these colors to indicate effective and ineffective relationship processes with all transactional analysis concepts when it is relevant. This is a variation and extension of the “blue ego states” model (Wagner, 1994). In this article, we use black lines throughout.

The other important aspect of this model is that a person’s view of “myself, you, or them” as not OK is wholly subjective; it represents his or her internal process. In terms of three-dimensional OKness, this is likely to relate to the nature and quality of the social relationship the person is currently in.

I’m OK, You’re OK, They’re OK

![Figure 5](image)

**Figure 5**

“Everyone’s OK”

(positions in this and all following diagrams are in the order I, You, They)

This position represents balance. The staff member does not need to place himself or herself in a one-up or one-down position either within relationships or in relation to anyone else outside those relationships. This is not to say that such individuals will be in agreement with everyone in their sphere, simply that they treat people they relate to with respect and expect others to treat them in the same way. One member of the YOS has consistently maintained this position, but it has not prevented her from challenging others. Just as with the OK Corral, where “I’m OK, You’re OK” is regarded as the “healthy” position, this is the only “healthy” position of the eight from the three-dimensional diagram in Figure 4.
This is the antisocial position. A staff member in this position consistently treats everyone else as not OK and is likely to be identified as a "bully." Alternatively, the person may regularly play "Gotcha," that is, always catch people with something that is supposedly wrong. While this position can be common in teams, it was not evident in the YOS team at any stage.

I'm OK, You're Not OK, They're OK

In this position the staff member's relationships with others can only stay OK by making someone else not OK. These "others" can be a whole range of people. The staff member is also likely to change his or her perspective on who is not OK depending on whom he or she is with at the moment. Initially, quite a few members of the service spent a great deal of time in this position. There was not yet a strong sense of identity or belonging, and this was reinforced by a subgroup’s focus on its organization of origin rather than its membership of the YOS.

I'm OK, You're Not OK, They're Not OK

This is a persecutor/blaming/scapegoating position. The staff member in this position might pick on one other member of the team, pointing out that those from his or her previous agency (They) are thinking about a certain issue in the right way, whereas that person is not. "They" are not necessarily involved in this process; they merely serve as the means to further the blaming process. Again, to our knowledge, this position was not a feature in the YOS.

I'm Not OK, You're Not OK, They're OK

The staff member in this position might scapegoat a particular person, blaming him or her for some problem or other. An alternative pattern would be scapegoating everyone in the service and making another agency OK. This position was initially quite common in discussions at the YOS. The state of constant flux in which the organization found itself and the hanging on to old, "better," "tried and tested" loyalties led to people making themselves and each other not
OK in comparison to others outside the organization.

I'm Not OK, You're Not OK, They're Not OK

This is the hopeless position from all sides and would lead to a dysfunctional staff member and could develop into, or signify, a dysfunctional situation. At no time was the situation at the YOS, as described to us, as difficult as this.

I'm Not OK, You're OK, They're OK

A staff member in this position might be idealizing/idolizing the person he or she is addressing (i.e., "You"). The person might be saying something like, "You're so clever. No one else here knows how to do it. I'd like you to show me how to do it (or even do it for me)." This was not a position we encountered with the YOS.

I'm Not OK, You're OK, They're OK

Staff members in this position see themselves in the victim corner of the drama triangle (Karpman, 1968). They will be isolated within the relationships and groups of which they are part. An example could be a staff member who feels less competent than the members of his or her peer group, or the organization as a whole might experience itself negatively in relation to other youth offending service teams and/or to the government.
Using the Model of 3D OKness to Plan Initial Interventions

The model did not in itself provide the means to change the patterns of OKness in the YOS situation. It did, however, give us a way to make sense of some of the initial processes that went on within the organization.

The YOS works with young people whose behavior tends to be "I'm OK, You're Not OK, They're Not OK," and it might have been easy in some situations for the service to develop a parallel process within its own system. This occurred during one exercise called the River Crossing (Silberman, 1999). The entire service had to find ways to cross a fantasized river. Pieces of card were put down to represent stepping stones. In the exercise, a "river guardian" removes these "stones," thus making it harder for everyone to get across. Interestingly, some of the YOS team saw spare cards on the facilitator's chair and were "selling" them for a pound so that they could surreptitiously be placed in the river, making it easier to cross. Those undertaking this activity were the people within the group who originally came from the police force!

Using the 3D OKness model offered a way to understand a staff member's context in a detailed way that accounted for differences in the person's sense of OKness, particularly when coming to a new service and leaving prior agencies with their already well-defined structures and systems. While each individual has his or her particular "existential life position" (Berne, 1972/1975), this may not necessarily fit with the visible, social (three-dimensional) level of their interactions with others.

Conclusion

Organizational transactional analysis requires clarity in contracting within a context, taking into account external influences on an organization. The 3A model can be used to make an assessment of the organization and to make decisions about the most appropriate interventions and in what order they might best occur. Within each of the areas of the 3A diagram, other transactional analysis concepts come into play as appropriate. The diagram aids in the development of appropriate and sequential interventions for any particular organization. This, in itself, can aid in the development of congruence between all sections because difficulties and disagreements can be discussed through the use of the model and related concepts.

Because transactional analysis is a social psychology, the concept of three-dimensional OKness as represented in the 3D model is particularly pertinent for organizational and community use. With the development of a multiagency organization, such as the youth offending service, it has particular relevance, but it could be used equally well with groups of young people, between different organizations, and so on. This model can be used to assist organizations, teams, and individuals in understanding the complexity of relationships more fully and to put their experience into words. It has been successfully used in organizations with teams of individuals struggling to relate to each other in effective ways. In those contexts, individuals frequently made changes once they recognize the patterns in which they are involved.

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