

Can Organizations Learn? Exploring a Shift from Conflict to Collaboration

Nelly Robles García, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Jardín Etnobotánico, Sala IV, Reforma 501, Centro Histórico, Oaxaca, Oaxaca 68000; nellym_robles@yahoo.com.mx
Jack Corbett, Portland State University, Hatfield School of Government, PO Box 751, Portland, OR 97207; corbettj@pdx.edu

BOTH ORGANIZATION THEORY AND PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE tell us that organizations mired in conflict have a more difficult time accomplishing their goals than organizations that are not. The transaction costs associated with conflict—money, staff time, lost opportunities—consume resources that otherwise could contribute to pursuing primary organizational goals. Given that natural and cultural resource management agencies are perpetually resource-poor (i.e., there is never enough of what is needed to meet the demands of the agency), any reduction in organizational conflict could be valuable. Conversely, failure to learn and adapt would suggest a significant agency deficiency, or that learning is less useful than other responses.

This paper explores organizational learning in Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (hereafter INAH, its acronym in Spanish). INAH's responsibility is to support research, analysis, protection, and dissemination of Mexico's archaeological and anthropological heritage; it manages cultural, but not natural, resources. Founded in 1939, INAH is housed organizationally under the Secretary of Public Education, a decision reflecting its role in educating the public about the cultural and historical contributions of Mexico's indigenous population to contemporary society. INAH's jurisdiction ranges from any subsurface archaeological remains, to the exploration and protection of sites, ranging in scope from individual houses, to pyramids and monumental complexes, such as Teotihuacan, Tajin, or Chichen Itza (Olive Negrete and Castro-Pozo 1988).

Here we focus on two World Heritage sites in Oaxaca, southern Mexico. In 1987, the city of Oaxaca, and the nearby archaeological site at Monte Alban, were among the first Mexican nominations to World Heritage status. In 2010, an assemblage of caves and related features between Yagul and Mitla also were inscribed on the World Heritage List as "Prehistoric Caves of Yagul and Mitla in the Central Valley of Oaxaca" (hereafter referred to as "Las Cuevas," as the site is known locally). While the colonial architecture of the city of Oaxaca, and the spectacular temples

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and pyramids of Monte Alban, are obvious to even the most obtuse observer, the significance of the rock shelters, pits, and caves distributed along the rough hillsides between Yagul and Mitla is invisible to all but the most determined archaeologists. The central question is whether INAH drew, from its sometimes turbulent history of managing Monte Alban cultural resources, any lessons likely to reduce conflict in developing management strategies for Las Cuevas.

Understanding context

Two central features of organizational context are especially relevant here. First, as a central government agency endowed with monopoly power over Mexico's archaeological sites and materials, INAH considered itself in an unassailable position relative to potential challengers. In a country where political centralization concentrated agency power in Mexico City, bureaucracies there appeared to have few possible rivals. In Oaxaca, as elsewhere, local communities were often the formal owners of the land, but presidential decrees placed sites under INAH's oversight regarding excavation and development, and local communities had little practical possibility of constraining INAH via governmental structures and processes. While communities owned the land, INAH possessed the legal and financial capacity to determine its use. Second, it is important to recognize that INAH and the local councils governing indigenous communities had very different understandings of how decision processes functioned when they met to address points of ambiguity, disagreement, or conflict. These differences in organizational worldview generated recurring confrontations, as INAH sought to assert control over jurisdictional boundaries, land use, resource access, or other areas it considered under its domain, while communities pushed back in defense of what they considered to be historical rights, or matters central to community survival.

Appreciating INAH's dominant value system in the 1970s through the 1990s is particularly important in assessing its learning capability. Beyond the great weight attributed to its legal position, in a system where written laws and rules define the arena of discourse, INAH's decision-making system placed great emphasis on hierarchy and segmentation. Critical decisions were reviewed at several levels and passed through multiple offices, depending on subject matter. Depending on their nature they might also be subject to review by the Council of Archaeology (responsible for all archeological projects in the country), and possibly outside agencies. INAH also attached a high value to expertise, to the point where it runs its own university, the National School of Anthropology and History (ENAH for its acronym in Spanish). ENAH trains the vast majority of Mexico's archeologists, and many of INAH's archeologists spend some time assigned to ENAH as instructors, managing interns in field projects, reviewing theses, and otherwise influencing the next generation of archaeologists. One consequence, however, is that the experiences and views of the current generation will be imprinted on the next, a developmental process making change slow and uncertain.

In contrast, Oaxacan village communities generally depend on councils selected in popular assembly through extended discussion, a process intended to produce a consensus regarding community leadership for periods of three years. Internal friction and feuds are not uncommon, but communities strive to present, to the outside world, an appearance of solidarity, and a willingness to engage in overt confrontation to defend community interests. Tradition and at least formal deference to the principle of consensus offer a sharp contrast to INAH's emphasis on national law and hierarchical structures. Attention to solidarity, and highly developed strategies for resisting INAH's attempts to frame and control agendas (e.g., prolonged discussion in indigenous languages in the face of INAH representatives) become mechanisms for pushing back against national government's assertion of policies and programs (Robles García and Corbett 2010).

Nowhere is this more evident than in the differing attitudes toward conflict. To INAH, conflict is, at best, an impediment to rational organizational behavior and, at worst, a reflection of

organizational failure. Conflicts cost time and money, and may complicate relations with other agencies and jurisdictions, disrupt an array of stakeholders, and impede the attainment of organizational goals. Local conflicts are to be avoided, particularly if they might filter up the hierarchy, and cause headaches and adverse public reaction in Mexico City. Locally, conflicts might be a nuisance to a site manager or state-level director, but in Mexico City they are an embarrassment, as they suggest INAH is not capable of managing its responsibilities.

For communities, conflict can be beneficial. It serves as a rallying point, as the local David takes on the aggressive outsider, Goliath. It underscores community solidarity, and suggests the community's long-term interests are at risk. Especially in circumstances where local INAH professionals or managers must confront mobilized communities, physical intimidation is a time-honored resistance mechanism. While seeking ways to manage and diffuse conflict may appeal to INAH functionaries, their community counterparts may see little reason to acquiesce.

The Oaxaca World Heritage experience

The 1987 announcement of World Heritage status for the archaeological site of Monte Alban led to the demarcation of an official archaeological zone by President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, in 1992. The declaration of the zone did nothing to alter ownership of the land included; it remained in the hands of communities or, in some cases, private owners. But it conferred on INAH the authority to manage land use, such as housing, or other practices likely to disturb archaeological materials, for example, excavation, or removing stones for construction material. While at remote locations such changes might have little overt impact on the landscape, the Monte Alban site represents the largest empty space adjacent to the city of Oaxaca, and the attractiveness of finding a housing location with proximity to urban services and employment was matched by the willingness of communities to “sell” lots for housing or other purposes, even when legal prohibitions existed. For example, the prospect of selling 240 square yard lots for six months' salary (at minimum wage) was a strong temptation. That such transactions had no legal basis mattered little, as long as everyone, from buyers to local authorities, pretended they did.

In such circumstances, INAH struggled to enforce its authority over land use but had few resources at its disposal. It lacked funds to purchase land outright, and faced legal barriers to purchase because frequently no one had clear title. Community officials saw no benefit in enforcing the legal claims of INAH against their own neighbors and relatives; after all, the community officials had to live in the community. While theoretically INAH could call on federal law enforcement, in practice this was problematic. Beyond the sheer number of cases, few federal agents were tempted to spend their time dispossessing elderly women from hillside shacks when there was more public approval in chasing narcotics dealers or automobile theft rings.

Much of the 5000-acre Monte Alban archaeological zone historic uses included grazing, native foods and herb gathering, and collecting firewood. Though nominally benign, such uses resulted in erosion, cooking fires spreading out of control, and other threats to the site's hillsides and vegetation. Although INAH staff responded to abuses when they could, the 20-mile perimeter of the archaeological zone, unfenced and largely unpatrolled, was extraordinarily vulnerable to penetration and displacement (Corbett and González Alafita 2002).

A dozen years of change

Starting in the late 1990s, recognizing the deficiencies and frustrations of the prevailing model, a new management team introduced an approach resembling cultural resources management (Cruz González 2012). While the shift in Monte Alban's leadership was fortuitous, rather than planned, one consequence was a new approach to working with the communities in the archaeological zone. A staff archaeologist assumed explicit responsibility as a community liaison, meeting

with community leadership and other interested residents on a regular basis. Rather than treating neighbors as a source of unending headaches, the new approach sought to be proactive, and to recognize that community leaders pursued quarrels with INAH as a way of responding to political pressures and other concerns within the community, rather than because there existed fundamental problems with INAH. INAH, while having an extensive cadre of anthropologists, had made little use of its own human resources to developing ways to work with testy neighbors.

The Monte Alban management plan, the first for any zone in the country, explicitly recognized the importance of the site–society interface, and that without attention to the population outside the boundary, it would be difficult to manage the land inside it (Robles García and Corbett 2011). This proved a special challenge because INAH is not a land management agency, and does not have statutory authority to address land-related questions not associated with cultural resources. During the dry season, wildfires starting outside zone boundaries frequently burned into the zone, but there were no provisions in the INAH budget for firefighting; staff fought fires with brooms and machetes. By approaching outside funders, and through training agreements with Oaxaca state agencies and Mesa Verde National Park, Monte Alban developed its own wild-fire response capacity that included neighboring communities (Robles García and Corbett 2007). Now fire response is possible before the fire enters the zone boundary.

The new strategy also recognized the importance of the archaeological zone as a potential source of income and employment for the local population. While little of the land is fertile enough for significant agricultural production, most of it can be used for grazing. Where grazing has been restricted, or wood-cutting disallowed, the communities suffered economic losses, while most of the gain associated with tourist visitation has accrued to the hotels, restaurants, shops, and taxis in the city of Oaxaca. By looking for ways to give community residents hiring preference for maintenance and custodial work, by creating opportunities to sell crafts or other goods, and by creating other links between the archaeological zone and surrounding communities, there has been some success giving the communities an economic stake in the site's survival and success.

And there have been some creative projects connecting the zone and local communities. Monte Alban developed its own plant nursery to nurture more than 30,000 shrubs and trees annually. INAH staff, volunteers, and community members engage in reforestation projects intended to reduce damaging runoff down the hillsides into inhabited areas below, produce collectable fruits, and revitalize much of the zone as a major green space, accessible to Oaxaca residents. A very popular junior ranger program brings children from neighboring communities to Monte Alban, during periods of high visitor traffic, to act as monitors for fragile structures and otherwise remind visitors of the importance of cultural heritage stewardship (Robles García and Corbett 2008). When these children go home at night with their INAH cap and whistle, they carry the message that Monte Alban is as much theirs as it is INAH's.

And now to Las Cuevas

The 2010 inclusion of Las Cuevas on the World Heritage List creates an interesting challenge in that much of INAH's senior administration in Mexico City are products of the ENAH, and a long period of socialization as part of the INAH hierarchy. There has been little reason to expect INAH to embrace the changes in practice seen at Monte Alban since the late 1990s, particularly as INAH's top administrators (appointed by President Enrique Peña Nieto) were veteran career employees with little interest in new approaches. Their unexpected removal in summer 2013, for reasons unrelated to Oaxaca, triggered policy and leadership uncertainties that remain unresolved. Such uncertainties are particularly wearing for middle-level professionals, most of whom work on renewable six-month contracts, while trying to establish institutional arrangements that will take years to mature.

To the extent administrators on the ground in Oaxaca have worked at Monte Alban or are familiar with the community-focused efforts there it is possible early attempts to build effective relations between the World Heritage site and those communities with land inside the official site boundary may be productive. For example, rather than build a single interpretive center near site headquarters, INAH opted to work with affected communities to make sure each one has a local center. Not only does that contribute to the sense of participation, it also indicates that INAH recognizes the potential such centers may have for generating visitor traffic and employment. INAH has also begun to look for collaborative arrangements with non-profit organizations that could provide services or opportunities.

Yet INAH's engagement of the Las Cuevas communities does not take place on a blank canvas. Other federal agencies compete with INAH for influence, budget allocations, and patronage. To the extent that INAH's reputation as a potentially heavy-handed regulator precedes it, other agencies may gain favor by extending services. The secretary of communications and transportation has a responsibility for road-building, not protecting vestiges of ancient irrigation works or house sites, and the Federal Electrification Commission is more interested in building transmission lines than protecting cultural landscapes. Las Cuevas is adjacent to the growing service center, Tlacolula de Matamoros, making its empty lands attractive options for housing or other construction. Theoretically, an interagency planning secretariat resolves differences and facilitates coordination, but in practice its effectiveness depends more on the good will and political skills of respective local managers than on official agreements signed by distant and distracted cabinet secretaries.

Indeed, one of the more significant lessons from Monte Alban is the critical importance of team-building for negotiating productive relationships with local communities. Imaginative leadership must work with, and be supported by, a team designed to meet local circumstances, not institutional traditions. For this reason, INAH's local staff includes not only archaeologists and architects, but also botanists and a veterinarian. By highlighting ways in which protection of wild-life species or an understanding of plant evolution may attract visitors otherwise disappointed by a lack of pyramids and temples, INAH's collaborative relationship with communities may bypass the long period of site-society conflict that marked the first World Heritage designation. Decisions regarding policies and personnel within INAH will help us understand how much INAH has learned about conflict with external actors.

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