Can Organizations Learn?
Exploring a Shift from Conflict to Collaboration

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BOTH ORGANIZATION THEORY AND PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE tell us that organizations mired in conflict have a more difficult time in accomplishing their goals than organizations that are not. Among other considerations, the transaction costs associated with conflict—money, staff time, lost opportunities—consume resources that otherwise could contribute to pursuing primary organizational goals. Given the reality that agencies involved in managing natural and cultural resources are perpetually resource-poor in that there is never enough of what is needed to meet the demands on the agency, it would seem any advance toward reducing organizational conflict could be valuable in advancing an agency's mission. Conversely, failure to learn and adapt would suggest a significant agency deficiency or that learning is less useful than other, less-obvious outcomes.

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 the country's archaeological and anthropological heritage; it manages cultural but not natural resources. Founded in 1939, INAH is housed organizationally in 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. Its jurisdiction ranges from any subsurface archaeological remains anywhere 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, in 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 and pyramids of Monte Alban are obvious to even the most ob-

tuse 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 and conflictual history of managing the cultural resources of Monte Alban 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 the archaeological sites and materials of Mexico, INAH considered itself in an unassailable position vis-à-vis potential challengers. In a country where political centralization concentrated agency power in Mexico City, bureaucracies there appeared to have few possible rivals. Although in Oaxaca, as elsewhere, local communities were often the formal owners of the land, presidential decrees placed sites under INAH's oversight for purposes of excavation and development, and these 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–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 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 archaeologists in the country and many of INAH's archaeologists spend some time assigned to ENAH as instructors, managing interns in field projects, reviewing theses, and otherwise contributing to the academic formation of 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, 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 in defense of 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—prolonged discussion in indigenous languages in the face of INAH representatives, for example—become mechanisms for pushing back against national government 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 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 if they might filter up the hierarchy to cause headaches and adverse public reaction in Mexico City. Locally they 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 may, at least within limits, be positive. It serves as a rallying point, as the local David takes on the aggressive outside Goliath. It underscores calls for 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 mechanism for resistance. While seeking ways to manage and diffuse conflict may appeal to INAH functionaries, their community counterparts may see little reason to give up ways to resist outside domination.

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 practices likely to disturb archaeological materials, e.g., excavating for fill or removing stones for building material. While at remote locations such changes in practice might have little overt impact on the landscape, Monte Alban 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," even when legal prohibitions existed, lots for housing or other purposes. The prospect of exchanging lots of approximately 240 square yards for payments equivalent to 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 enforcing the legal claims of INAH against their own neighbors and relatives; after all they 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 historically had served as grazing land, a place to collect native foods and herbs in season, a source of firewood, and for other purposes. Though nominally benign, such uses stimulated erosion, led to cooking fires spreading out of control, and threatened other degradation of the hillsides and vegetation of the site. 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, a new management team, recognizing the deficiencies and frustrations of the prevailing model, began an effort to introduce an approach resembling cultural resources management (Cruz González 2012). While the shift in Monte Alban's leadership was more fortuitous than planned, one consequence was a new approach to working with the communities whose lands fell within the archaeological zone. A staff archaeologist assumed the explicit responsibility of acting as community liaison, meeting with community leadership and groups of 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 the archaeological zone as a way of responding to political pressures and other concerns within the community rather than because there existed fundamental problems with the relationship. It became evident that INAH, while having an extensive cadre of anthropologists, had made little use of its own human resources in developing ways to work with testy neighbors.

The creation of a management plan for Monte Alban, the first for any zone in the country, explicitly recognized the significance of attending to the site–society interface—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 uphill into the zone but there were no provisions in the INAH budget for firefighting gear; 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 wildfire response capacity that included incorporation of neighboring communities (Robles García and Corbett 2007). This makes response possible before 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. To the extent grazing has been restricted or wood-cutting ended the communities suffer economic losses, yet 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 preference in hiring for maintenance and custodial work, by creating opportunities to sell crafts or other goods, and by otherwise creating ways to link the archaeological zone

with surrounding communities there has been some success in giving the communities an economic stake in its survival and success rather than see INAH as an interloper on behalf of a distant national government and foreign tourists.

And there have been creative efforts to link to communities in other ways. 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 run–off down the hillsides into inhabited areas below, produce collectable fruits, and revitalize much of the zone as a major green space accessible to the city of Oaxaca. 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 stewardship with regard to cultural heritage (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 uncertainties regarding policy and leadership that to date remain unresolved. Such uncertainties are particularly wearing for middle-level professionals, most of whom work on renewable six-month contracts while trying to put in place 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 having lands inside the official site boundary will 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 perhaps 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 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 of Tlacolula de Matamoros, making its empty lands attractive options for housing or commercial construction. Theoretically, an interagency planning secretari-

at resolves differences and facilitates coordination, but in practice its effectiveness depends more on 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 the experience at Monte Alban is the critical importance of team-building in 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 botanists and a veterinarian. By highlighting ways in which protection of wildlife 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 it has learned regarding avoid conflict with external actors.

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