

Learning 16 – The Power of Proliferating Associations

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Most local associations are small affinity groups whose members jointly accomplish their purposes without being paid. Their forms can range from a local American Legion Post to a softball team to a conservation club, etc. When they are created, they are almost always composed of a relatively small number of people.¹

As the association undertakes its work, it depends on two attributes of the members if it is to achieve its purposes:

- The capacities talents and abilities of each member.
- The mutual trust of the members with each other.

Through time, many associations grow in membership. The growth may increase the capacity of the group. However, beyond a certain number of members, the association may diminish in its effectiveness. This is because the associational essentials of trust and mutual knowledge cannot be maintained beyond a certain scale.

As the group expands from 10 to 100 individuals, each member has less and less trust building mutual experience with the others. And each knows less and less about the associational building capacities of the others. Because of the inherent limitations of going to scale, often the associational members feel the need for a “centrifugal force” in order to keep or pull them together. Commonly, the response is to create an administrator, convener, or executive – someone all can trust and who can keep track of the unique capacities of each member. This person will usually need to be paid so the funding issue emerges. This is followed by the necessity to have tax exemption. In this way this association slowly transforms itself into a small institution with a developing culture of a system rather than an association.

This process is, of course, the positive process by which we have created many of our important institutions such as hospitals, universities, social agencies, etc. Obviously this has been a beneficial process. However, the nature of these hierarchical systems loses the community building power of trust based, capacity enabling citizen associations.

¹ In this paper, the focus is upon beneficial characteristics of associations. However, an association is an amoral structure. It has no inherent values. The local chapter of the NAACP and the Kl Klux Klan are both local citizen associations. While associations here are discussed in their beneficial aspect, it is critical to also recognize the impact of negative associations and to deal with their effects. Just as “the answer to bad speech is more speech”, the answer to bad associations may be the same.

It is, of course, not inevitable that associations will evolve into institutions as they face the issue of growth. There is another approach to dealing with the problem of scale, an approach that preserves the essential associational characteristics of trust and shared mutual capacities. This approach might be called proliferation rather than institutionalization or replication.² It is a process that frequently emerges when a founding group recognizes the special power of their being a small group but also see that what they have learned to do could be usefully learned by others. Therefore, they support or stimulate more small groups with similar purposes. However, they do not create a centralizing or hierarchical system. Rather, they spawn a proliferation of small groups, each with their uniquely skilled members and with mutual trust as the cohering force.

One well-known example of such a proliferating group process is Alcoholics Anonymous. There are countless AA groups around the world and almost no central entity. The members recognize that beyond a certain scale, the intensely personal trust and mutual contribution will be lost.

Another example is La Leche League - proliferating small groups of mothers enabled by trust and mutual capacity. They do have a small central organization but it is a support unit held in check by the dispersed power of the local groups.

There are many other examples of proliferating small associations including:

- Associations of “home schooling” parents that often link together in decentralized associations of associations for mutual support, learning, and assistance to newly formed groups.
- Parent associations of children labeled “developmentally disabled” who create linked associations of associations supporting each other and newly forming groups.
- Neighborhood organizations that create links through their annual convening as Neighborhoods USA where they share learnings and inform newly created associations.
- “Church planting” groups of churches that foster new local efforts to create small-scale centers of faith.
- Black Lives Matter, an alliance of local groups with no central structure or hierarchy although they are guided by 13 principals.

Nationally, there are undoubtedly hundreds of thousands of these “flat proliferated associations”. Many of them perform functions that parallel those of institutions e.g. health, education, addictions, recovery, care for vulnerable and marginal people, civil rights, neighborhood wellbeing, etc.

² Replication is a system-designed method of reproducing a standard model of activity.

In many cases the cumulative effect of the actions of “flat proliferated associations” achieve more desirable outcomes than the parallel institution. And they achieve this outcome in spite of having very little money and/or paid employees or experts.

Consider the measurable increase in health status resulting from associational social capital compared to that of institutionalized medical activity. Robert Putnam’s data in *Bowling Alone* demonstrates that social capital formation is more consequential in improving health status than medical systems. In this sense associations are low-input and high-output “producers” while institutions are generally high-input and low-output methods of achieving a healthy population. Therefore the proliferation of associational groups is the most efficient and effective way of enabling a healthy neighborhood or nation.

In terms of utility and productivity there are some other significant distinctions between the nature and functions of proliferated associations compared with institutionalized systems:

- Institutions are believed to provide continuity of functions while associations are thought to be more fleeting and ephemeral. However, if one considers local faith-based groups as essentially proliferated associations, many have proven to endure for centuries.
- Institutions operate on the premise of scarcity and money is their mode of rationing benefits. The proliferated associations operate in the context of abundance. Their basic resource of citizen capacity, care and knowledge are abundant.
- Institutions operate within the context of the economics of scarcity. Therefore, their essential mode of behavior is competitive. The competitive model is antithetical to the survival of proliferated associations. Both individually and collectively, the associational mode is necessarily cooperation.
- By their very nature, every association is creating social capital that provides numerous ancillary individual and community benefits that are not necessarily related to each association’s purpose.³ The proliferating process in itself is always increasing the benefits of social capital in the lives of more and more people.
- In the world of engineering a measure of effectiveness and efficiency is a process that has reduced inputs and increased outputs. One way of understanding the parallel process of institutions and associations is to use the engineering standard.
- The most serious decision making discussions require face-to-face interaction. Beyond a certain associational size, universal participation becomes practically impossible. There are too many people for everyone to speak. This is why the proliferating associations are so critical for an inclusive democracy. They provide

³ For a data-based explanation of the multiple benefits of social capital, see Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*.

an ever-expanding potential for universal access to the deliberation. On the other hand, institutions cannot provide the structure for a universalizing voice in shaping public goals.

Considering the unique and powerfully beneficial effects of associations and their proliferated work, it is important to consider the factors that enable and enhance the proliferation of associations and the links and networks of these groups. Are there initiatives that see their basic task as enhancing the proliferation of associational functions and inventions?

Also, to what degree are the effects of increasing institutionalization of community functions a significant deterrent to associational proliferation? What could be done to limit these institutional barriers? Would there be any institution willing to take on this task? Or is it one of the essential functions of the proliferated associations to push back the institutional barriers?