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FACTORS INFLUENCING THE SALIENCY AND LEGITIMACY  
OF PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS: A CASE STUDY\*

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In recent years, an increasing body of theoretical and empirical literature has focused upon the reciprocal influence between the complex organization and its environment. Thompson and McEwen (1958), for example, have conceptualized organizational goals as dynamic in nature, requiring constant interaction between the organization and its environment. This interaction process often takes the form of a power relationship, with both organization and environment competing for domination. As a result, organizations must adopt strategies for coming to terms with the environment, simply to ensure survival. Randall (1973, p. 236) describes such strategies as involving the process of building, and then maintaining environmental support for organizational goals and objectives, products or services, policies or programs.

One significant conceptual linkage between organizations and their environments is what has been termed "organizational legitimacy." In this connection, Dowling and Pfeffer (1975, p. 135) have commented that legitimacy can provide a useful empirical focus for examining organizational behaviors taken with respect to their environments, particularly if seen in the context of a constraint on such behaviors. The general purpose of this paper is to study this concept of organizational legitimacy, its close relationship with the salience of an organization, and the way in which both concepts reflect and influence the interaction between the public organization and its political and economic environments. More specifically, we will explicate a number of factors which are significant in enhancing or undercutting the saliency and legitimacy of a public organization, and suggest several organizational strategies which may be adopted in order to ensure continued acceptability and survival. The empirical focus for this discussion is an analysis of the life cycle of a Provincial Emergency Measures Organization (a Canadian provincial government agency). This disaster-relevant organization faced changing environmental conditions which diminished, nearly destroyed, and then dramatically reestablished its legitimacy. The account is longitudinal in nature, starting with the origins of the agency, its loss of plausibility in the face of a changing international climate, and its reemergence as an acceptable salient entity.

### 1. Organizational Saliency and Legitimacy

Organizational legitimacy refers to acceptance of the formal organization by its relevant others, based on the congruency between its goals and activities and the dominant values of the superordinate system. Put slightly differently, Dynes and Quarantelli (1975, p. 48) have described legitimacy as implying "acceptance by the community of an organization as being a valid institutional form for carrying out a particular course of action." This acceptance of a given organization by its relevant public (those actors, groups, or organizations upon whom an agency is dependent for support) depends in part upon: (1) that public's acceptance of the organization's goals and/or outputs as valid, necessary, and worthwhile, (2) the perception of effective past performances by the organization in pursuit of its goals. As Dowling and Pfeffer (1975, p. 126) rightly point out, legitimacy is a constraint on organizational behavior, but "it is a dynamic constraint which changes as organizations adapt, and as the social values which define legitimacy change and are changed."

Organizational saliency refers to the degree of visibility that an organization has with its relevant public. Saliency is thus conceptually distinct from legitimacy, and may vary from high to low for a given organization. If the

dimensions of legitimacy and saliency are cross-classified, the resulting typology (Figure 1) can be of utility in comparing complex organizations.

FIGURE 1

Organizational Saliency-Legitimacy

	low legitimacy	high legitimacy
low saliency	1	2
high saliency	3	4

Following this framework, it can be expected that organizations which would fall in cell #3 would have the most serious legitimacy problems, those in cell #4 would have the least problems in legitimacy, while organizations falling in cells 1 and 2 would have more stable positions due to their low general visibility. It is essential to point out here that saliency and legitimacy are not stable attributes, and therefore an organization's position in the above typology may change as a result of environmental conditions which have shifted over time.

2. Legitimacy and Public Organizations

In examining the issue of organizational legitimacy, it is important to recognize that the public organization differs somewhat from the private business or corporation in the nature of its relationships with its public. That is, the private organization has a direct linkage with the public at large, who, through their support or nonsupport (particularly economic), can determine whether the firm or corporation will survive. The situation of the public organization, especially if it is part of the government, is significantly different. In this regard, Walmsley and Zald (1973, p. 73) have pointed out that the recipient of services is usually not the immediate funder; and the taxpayer thus finds it difficult to discern linkage between his taxes and the benefits accruing from organizational output. As a result, the public organization must formulate special strategies in order to establish and maintain its saliency and legitimacy. As Randall (1973, p. 236) has noted, this means that it must be concerned not only with producing a product or delivering a service, but it must also engage in a political process of building support among sympathizers, other organizations, and legislators. This latter group is notably important, for the survival of a government organization is frequently as closely linked with internal political life as it is with general public acceptance.

Especially prone to functioning on the fine edge of survival/failure is the government-supported disaster-relevant organization or agency. Surfacing in the general consciousness chiefly in times of high emotion and public drama, its saliency will be swiftly heightened, while its legitimacy can be enhanced or shattered. In short, the disaster situation, by creating a condition of high visibility for all emergency-relevant organizations central to the disaster response, brings the whole issue of legitimacy to the fore. Yet ironically, the disaster-relevant public organization which exists in a low probability disaster

environment will often escape the Scylla of performance, only to perish in the Charybdis of perceived lack of need for its services. As a result of its largely preparatory activities, with only intermittent but highly visible coping tasks, such an organization can be particularly vulnerable to factors undercutting organizational legitimacy.

In particular, the research presented here focuses upon the nature of factors undercutting organizational legitimacy and upon strategies for reestablishing it. For, while the experience of an emergency-coping organization is not typical of all public organizations, it nevertheless has utility in terms of sensitizing the student of complex organizations to general factors closely associated with saliency and legitimacy levels, and with survival in a potentially hostile environment. The case under study afforded an excellent opportunity to study the dynamic interplay between saliency and legitimacy.

### 3. A Case Study

The research reported here was initially undertaken as a study of the response of public organizations in a province to severe flooding of a major river in early spring, 1973. At this time, two Canadian staff members of the Disaster Research Center conducted interviews with municipal, provincial, and federal government officials, military personnel, and representatives of the mass media and the provincial power company. These semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews were carried out at the Emergency Operating Center (E.O.C.) in the provincial capital -- the communication and coordination center of the flood response.

Eleven months later, a follow-up study was conducted, focusing upon the current state of the Provincial Emergency Measures Organization (E.M.O.), which had emerged as the chief coordinating agency during the 1973 flood response. At this time, the history of the organization was studied in depth, using newspaper reports and editorials, legislative records, pertinent interorganizational letters and documents, as well as interview material to reconstruct the origins and experience of the organization prior to the flood.

## Organizational Background and History

### Origins

The Canadian Emergency Measures Organization\*, the national equivalent of the provincially-based E.M.O., was established by the federal government in 1957. In its early years, its activities were primarily devoted to devising plans and preparations designed to counter the harmful after-effects of potential nuclear warfare. Given the context of the Cold War politics of the late fifties and early sixties, this nuclear attack orientation appeared relevant and the organization flourished.

In addition to the national organization, each province also had its own E.M.O. operating under a cost-sharing plan with the federal government. In the province under study, the E.M.O. was initially divided into three segments based

\*now known as Emergency Planning Canada

on provincial, county, and municipal organizations. All efforts in this field were supervised and controlled by the province and depended mainly on volunteers. In 1967 there was a major change in the concept of provincial government operations, centralizing many of the responsibilities of the municipal government system. As a consequence of this, E.M.O. became a solely provincial operation based on a provincial headquarters and five areas, each with its own headquarters and a small staff. Like the federal organization, the major thrust of E.M.O. operations in the province at this time was directed towards civil defense, specifically that pertaining to the consequences of nuclear attack.

### The Loss of Organizational Legitimacy

Brinkerhoff and Kunz (1972, p. xviii) have pointed out that, within the external environment of an organization, there is an ideology which imposes restrictions on it and, in part, shapes the nature of organizational decisions. Thus, Young and Larson (1965) found that among voluntary organizations in a community, those who most nearly embodied the value constellations of the community of which they were a part were awarded the highest prestige rankings. On the other hand, organizations whose purpose and goals were out of sync with the dominant community and societal ideology risk loss of legitimacy, and sometimes functional obsolescence. This is essentially what happened to the Provincial E.M.O.

By the middle sixties, the international situation was changing, and with it the perceived appropriateness of a strong civil defense organization. In the Kremlin, the colorful and dramatic shoe-pounding antics of the Khrushchev era had given way to the low-key rule of the Brezhnev-Kosygin group. On the world front, the Cold War appeared to deescalate, and peaceful coexistence seemed more probable. In 1968, the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks began, reinforcing this more optimistic climate.

In this context, the nuclear response orientation appeared to lose its relevance. With the immediate military threat now softened, it became impossible to maintain a widespread, continuing interest in such preparatory activities such as the construction of bomb shelters. In addition, official thinking on the nature of nuclear confrontation changed. Previously, plans had been based on the expectation that a nuclear attack, if it came, would be sudden and unforeseeable; now it was thought that a preliminary period of rising tension and conventional warfare would precede any nuclear exchange. In this context, it no longer seemed as vital to have a pre-established network of supplies and volunteers, as these could be recruited in time if a nuclear attack appeared imminent.

The financial guillotine fell first towards the national organization, which had a 25 percent budget reduction in 1968. The Provincial Government soon followed suit. In the spring of 1968, the Provincial Government announced a major reorganization of the Provincial E.M.O., reducing staff to one full-time officer and his secretary. Also, the inventory of equipment accumulated by E.M.O. was transferred to departments of government whose normal activities were allied to a number of responsibilities previously the sole jurisdiction of the Provincial E.M.O. Accordingly, the organization's budget was slashed by nearly 75 percent of its 1967 funds. In the words of a member of the Provincial Government who initiated these measures: "There was very little these people

could or were asked to do." Public reaction to these government moves was weak; in the province's two main urban newspapers, for example, it was limited to one newspaper editorial questioning the hasty dissolution of the wider organization, supported by two letters to the editor. For all extensive purposes, then, by 1968 the Provincial E.M.O. had lost nearly all its manpower, most of its funds, and much of its legitimacy.

#### Reformulation of Goals: The Environmental Context

Thompson and McEwen (1958) have specified one of the requirements for organizational survival to be "the ability to learn about the environment accurately enough and quickly enough to permit organizational adjustments in time to avoid extinction." As Sills (1961) demonstrated in his study of the March of Dimes organization, by successfully redirecting itself to new goals, an organization can overcome internal inertia and external lack of support, and thus recast its existence in a more acceptable framework. Similarly, Zald and Denton (1963) found that the Y.M.C.A. transformed its objectives from those of a largely evangelical and religious nature to those emphasizing more secular aspects such as crafts and physical education in order to maintain itself in the face of the growing secularization of American society. These new goals must be considered not only as relevant, but they must also direct the organization's activities to a distinctive "domain" where they do not threaten the claim of another more powerful organization. In short, as Randall (1973, p. 237) has suggested, the "healthy" organization must establish and maintain a distinct "policy space."

By the time of its near demise in 1968, E.M.O. officials, as well as E.M.O. personnel in other provinces, had realized that the possible resurgence of the organization depended upon a practical reconceptualization of the organization's purpose and goals. As a result, a new view of E.M.O. crystallized which stressed peacetime planning for natural disasters such as floods, tornadoes, and earthquakes. E.M.O.'s role in this was to act as an educator and planner in non-disaster times, and as an organizer and coordinator in times of disaster, while leaving most of the actual physical disaster-coping activities, such as search and rescue, to existing community organizations and institutions.

The next step here was for the organization to mobilize support for this new orientation, particularly at the cabinet level of the provincial and federal governments. E.M.O. was successful in gaining such support at both levels of government. In December of 1969, a Federal-Provincial Conference on Emergency measures was held in Ottawa, and the federal Minister of Defence, who was responsible for Canada E.M.O., received this view of E.M.O.'s role positively. In the Province, the newly-elected government, and especially the Municipal Affairs Minister, became convinced that it was dysfunctional to the public safety to have a situation where there was no one to coordinate the efforts of the fire and police departments, the army, private relief organizations and others involved in coping with natural disasters, and that the Provincial E.M.O. could take on this role successfully. Consequently, the Provincial Government announced an expanded E.M.O. would be legislated, with a 65 percent budget increase and six new full-time employees. Key additions here were a training officer, a planning officer, an emergency health officer, and a seventh member, an emergency welfare officer to be added soon after.

### The Process of Reorganization

By April 1973, then, E.M.O. was a reemergent and revitalized organization in the province. Staff members had been recruited and were in the process of settling into their new positions. Since the organization was essentially new, both in form and purpose, it did face what Stinchcombe (1965) has termed the "liability of newness." This meant that new roles had to be learned, loyalties built up and decision-making criteria formulated. Equally important was the lack of stable ties to those who could be regarded as clients or potential users of E.M.O. services. This was particularly relevant to relationships with other provincial officials, and with municipal officials from the myriad of small towns and villages throughout the largely rural province.

In this connection, the organization did have some advantages. Those recruited for the new posts were essentially career civil servants, most with military experience. They were thus able to transfer certain generalized organizing skills to their new positions. In addition, the director of the Provincial E.M.O. at this time was a former provincial cabinet member, well-known in government circles throughout the Province. As the director's position was part-time, he also held a high-ranking administrative position in the Department of Municipal Affairs, and thus possessed wide experience, an extensive net of contacts, and a preexisting degree of legitimacy and authority. Finally, because the central organization was small, the new staff was able to mold rapidly into a cohesive, informal unit. Nevertheless, the onus was on E.M.O. to demonstrate that it could play a valuable role in a disaster situation and that it was not, as the opposition party claimed, a "farce."

### The Reemergence of Legitimacy: The Flood Response

In this context, the major river in the Province flooded its banks in the early spring of 1973. Seriously affected was a 100-mile stretch of land along the river including the provincial capital, where E.M.O. headquarters was located. Over 2,500 private homes were flooded and 1,600 persons were forced to leave their homes. Since the Provincial E.M.O. had only recently been expanded, no formal, up-to-date plan existed, and most of the staff had only a limited idea of their realm of responsibility. Nevertheless, an Emergency Operating Center (E.O.C.) was set up by E.M.O. in the provincial hydro building and strategy meetings with other relevant officials began. Since few officials from other departments involved in the E.O.C. operation knew one another, there was an internal coordination vacuum which E.M.O. quickly filled. E.M.O. officials made a concerted effort early in the flood response to assign tasks to various groups in the E.O.C. and arranged for the relevant information and requests, both internal and external, to be funneled to them. Having established five chief task areas -- warning, evacuation, accommodation, feeding, and health and agriculture -- E.M.O. supplemented manpower resources available at the initial outset of the E.O.C. operation by calling in resource people from appropriate organizations and assigning them to one of the task areas. The core of this coordinating activity was a communications room in which an E.M.O. officer received and redirected all incoming requests for assistance.

As a result of its foresight and initiative, the Provincial E.M.O. emerged as the chief coordinating organization in the flood response. Information about the flooding was widely reported, both in the Province and across Canada, and it was the E.M.O. officials who were most frequently consulted and cited in the

media stories. Because of its central role in the flood response, E.M.O. achieved a new level of visibility and legitimacy in the eyes of all who might be considered its "relevant others." Even the opposition leader in the legislature conceded that the organization had proven itself a worthwhile expenditure. Thus, the organization's expansion was stabilized and even enhanced by its own effective performance in a disaster situation.

#### The Period of Consolidation

While E.M.O. had reestablished its legitimacy among both legislators and the public in the Province, it was still necessary for it to establish a viable domain for its activities during non-disaster times. Otherwise, it faced the danger of being vulnerable to future budget cuts based on inability to demonstrate that it was engaging in incisive ongoing programs.

In the year following the flood, E.M.O. consolidated its position in three significant ways. First of all, through extensive planning and education programs it concentrated on building up a strong network of interorganizational relationships throughout the Province. For example, E.M.O., upon request, assisted hospital administrators in developing and testing hospital disaster exercises necessary for hospital accreditation in the Province. This contributed significantly to new levels of interface between hospital and community disaster planning. Similarly, E.M.O. assisted a number of municipalities, many of whom had not previously engaged in any type of disaster planning, in formulating local community disaster plans. In the social services sector, an emergency welfare services plan was initiated for the whole Province, and work was begun towards integrating this with local community planning. Contingency planning was carried out with the Canadian armed forces and with the R.C.M.P., who act as the provincial police force, and an arrangement was negotiated with the Provincial Department of Highways and Forestry to link E.M.O. with their communications system. Other activities included: educating provincial and municipal officials in disaster-relevant skills; initiating a province-wide attempt to locate and catalogue various types of disaster and emergency-relevant equipment, both in the public and private sectors; and conducting simulated disaster drills.

Secondly, E.M.O. accepted short-run, emergency-related tasks in order to maintain support for the longer range planning types of activities. As the energy crisis dawned during the winter of 1974, the Provincial Government asked E.M.O. to take on a new activity -- developing a home heating oil contingency plan. Subsequently, a temporary staff was hired to assist in designing a home heating oil allocation system.

Thirdly, E.M.O. was careful not to over-expand in the immediate post-disaster period when there was a manifold increase in requests for planning assistance and training. This strategy put the organization in a position where it was not left with surplus personnel, equipment, etc. when the tide of client requests for services ebbed back to a lower level, and when financial austerity forced cutbacks in departments which appeared to be carrying excess personnel and physical resources.

It is clear then, from the experience of this E.M.O., that by formulating incisive strategies, a public organization can successfully recast its image, refurbish its legitimacy, and stabilize its position in a potentially destructive environment.



#### 4. Discussion

Dowling and Pfeffer (1975, p. 127) have pointed out that an organization facing problems of legitimacy can do three things to attempt to counteract the situation: (1) the organization can adapt its output, goals, and methods of operation to conform to prevailing definitions of legitimacy; (2) it can attempt through communication to alter the definition of social legitimacy so that it conforms to the organization's present practices, outputs, and values; and (3) it can attempt through communication to become identified with symbols, values, or institutions which have a strong base of social legitimacy.

The present study best fits the first of these responses and further suggests a number of specific factors which can undercut or enhance the legitimacy of public organizations along with various coping strategies linked to these influencing factors.

First of all, to be considered legitimate and viable, a public organization must be able to give a clear accounting of the nature and significance of its manifest goals and functions. In turn, these must be perceived by its relevant others as well-defined, distinctive and not seriously overlapping those of existing organizations. In the Province, and indeed throughout Canada, E.M.O. supporters failed to persuasively articulate the purpose and value of civil defense, nor were they successful in broadening its definition to include events less distant than a future Armageddon. Consequently, civil defense and E.M.O. became somewhat murky concepts in the public mind, most often identified with one minor phase of the organization's activities -- constructing "bomb shelters." It was only when faced with a survival situation that reconceptualization was carried out and sold to those responsible for its funding. Functional clarity, then, can significantly affect organizational legitimacy.

Closely related to this is the appropriateness of an organization for the environment in which it exists. That is, an organization may have a clearly stated purpose, meet what is later seen as a valid need, perform competently, and yet still suffocate in an atmosphere of rarified credibility. In the era of the fifties, for example, an environmental protection agency or a consumer affairs department would have been out of sympathy with the prevailing public mood, and thus considered inappropriate, despite a real but largely unperceived need for such organizations. Similarly, in the late sixties, the still prevalent nuclear attack orientation of E.M.O. was considered inappropriate by a public who no longer lived in immediate fear of enemy missiles, but rather looked more optimistically towards detente and peaceful coexistence. Public organizations then, particularly if they are on the edge of significant public policy issues, must be cognizant of prevailing values and ideologies in order to ensure their own appropriateness.

Thirdly, organizational legitimacy can be influenced by the degree to which an organization possesses what Selznick (1957) has called a "distinctive competence." When E.M.O. was reduced in size, budget, and resources, critics justified this on the basis that the organization performed no unique tasks which existing organizations could not carry out. When the provincial government approved an expanded E.M.O. organization, they did so on the recognition that the ability to successfully coordinate disaster-coping activities is indeed a distinctive skill. That E.M.O. emerged as the chief coordinating agency during the flood response appears to validate the fact that the organization did possess a significant degree of distinctive competence.

Fourthly, a public organization's legitimacy can vary with economic fluctuations in the primary system within which the public organization is situated. These economic fluctuations in turn change the valence of the cost-benefit payoff of the organization for its relevant others. The determination of the degree of payoff often depends on the general state of the economy. In periods of heavy deficit spending, recession, or other types of economic distress, a search is often initiated for ways of reducing spending by cutting back or eliminating organizations whose size and/or existence seemed more defensible in other times. What was seen as a benefit under more favorable financial conditions may now become a luxury. What may have been perceived as a reasonable expense before may now be viewed as unjustified. Under these conditions, organizations which formerly may have been considered a justifiable expenditure may now have their legitimacy undercut by budgetary considerations. In a changed financial environment of this type, such perceived basic needs as energy production are emphasized at the expense of more vulnerable areas like education and social planning. In the case of E.M.O. it was a financial cutback at the federal level which triggered a series of decisions resulting in the shrinkage of the provincial organization. Clearly, the status of the organization had been marginal for some time, but had the federal reductions not forced a cost-benefit reevaluation at the provincial level, E.M.O. might have forestalled any change. The public organizations then, must be constantly sensitive to what tangible, salient benefits it can provide to its clientele, given present needs and financial fluctuations.

Fifthly, the pattern of interrelationships between a public organization's relevant others can often influence its saliency and/or legitimacy. This pattern is rarely uniform, but rather is a fluid mixture distilled from the interaction between four chief entities -- the public, the media, the legislators, and other public organizations. Influence here is a multi-step process. In one common scenario, the first step consists of the media in their surveillance role, acting as the watchdog of governmental activity. In the second step, the public, or at least influential segments of it, are mobilized by the media and join with it to inform legislators of their disgruntlement. In the third step, the legislators, if they interpret this feedback as significant, use their funding power to bring about a change in the organization.

Just as a coalition of the media and the public acts to force change in an organization, it is also possible for such an alliance to act against change, particularly if this change means virtual or actual destruction of the organization. In the case of this E.M.O., such a coalition failed to occur, and with the exception of the previously noted editorial and two letters to the editor, there was public apathy at the shrinkage of E.M.O. in 1968. This was in evident contrast to the situation during and immediately following the flood when both media coverage and public opinion were actively supportive of E.M.O.

Other public organizations play a more indirect, but still significant role in influencing organizational legitimacy. By withholding cooperation in a situation requiring coordination in order to carry out a joint task successfully, or by engaging in functional cooptation -- intriguing to take over another's tasks and functions -- they can damage that agency's image of competence and authority. Alternatively, by allowing what Levine and his colleagues have termed "domain consensus" (Levine, et al. 1963), other organizations can contribute positively to the legitimacy of its neighbor department or agency. By deferring to the Provincial E.M.O. in setting up the coordination and communication structure at the E.O.C. during the flood response, other public organizations gave it a "functional space" from which to further reestablish its legitimacy.

Finally, there is the obvious, but significant, matter of performance competency. Organizational legitimacy requires perceived effectiveness and while this depends in part on image management, it also depends on actual competence. This can greatly enhance legitimacy, as occurred in the case of this E.M.O., but its absence can also bring about a swift decline in the future of the public organization. This is particularly true when poor performance will result in the usurpation of tasks or functions by a competing organization.

Keeping these six factors in mind, it is further possible to delineate six strategies suggested by the experience of the E.M.O. under study which can assist the public agency or department in consolidating its position in a potentially hostile environment. These are as follows: (1) possession of a distinctive battery of skills and resources not otherwise available to the community; (2) consonance of organizational goals and functions with the needs of those it is serving; (3) maintenance of a net of interpersonal relations with officials from other public and private organizations which can be utilized in time of crises as well as on an everyday basis; (4) the capability of justifying existing staff and physical resources in terms of the tangible benefits which each is able to deliver; (5) the capability of handling short-run, emergency-related tasks in order that support may be maintained for less critical long-range planning activities; and (6) efficient and competent task performance and conveyance of this image to the mass media.

Such actions as these can be highly beneficial in assisting the public organization to adapt successfully to its social, political and economic environments.

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