



Presented at the first annual meeting of the
Psychoanalytic Association of psychologists, coaches and consultants of
organizations

Moscow
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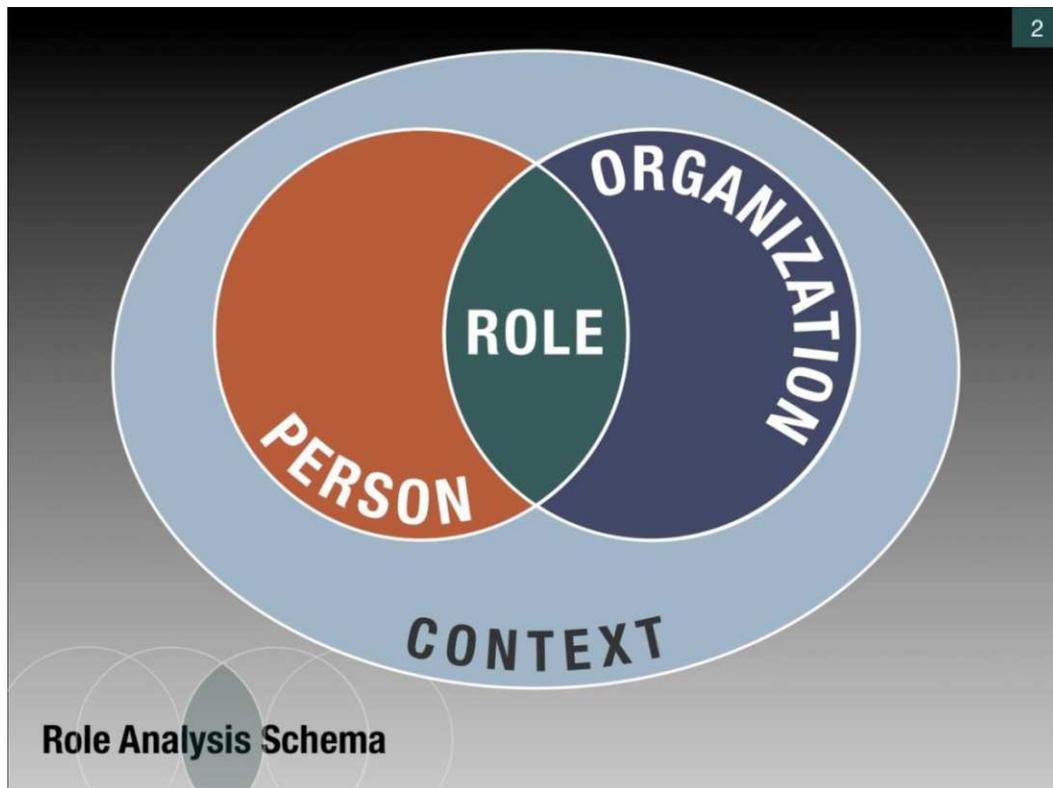
Part One

From what I understand, practically all of you attending this conference have had previous professions and previous careers. You have come to this fascinating, but rather obscure, organizational perspective, i.e. the psychoanalytic understanding of organizations, based on a keen interest in this fascinating field, and you all bring a great deal of experience and maturity to the task.

Some of you come from the therapeutic world and wish to ground yourself more in organizational understanding. Some of you (like me) come from the organizational world and wish to understand more about what is going on under its surface. Others (like Burkard and Howie) come from the academic world and wish to expand your intellectual horizons.

This is very often the case with this field, and it was certainly the case for me. I come from the educational community. I was a teacher in public schools in the USA for 20 years before becoming promoted to a leadership position and finding myself absolutely fascinated with what was going on in the organization I was working in. I couldn't understand why there was so much resistance to my

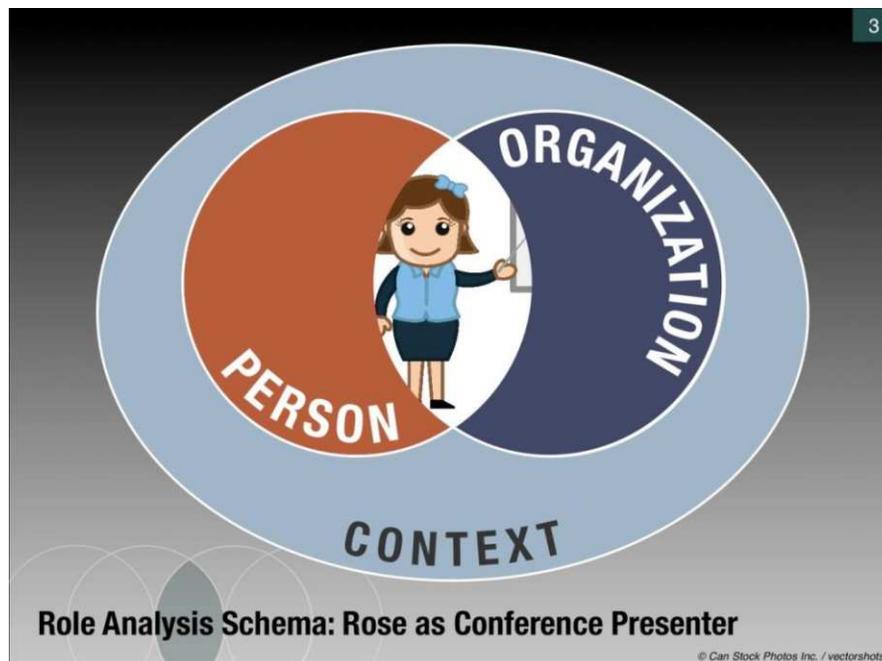
great ideas. So I began to explore and to make my transition to this field almost 30 years ago.



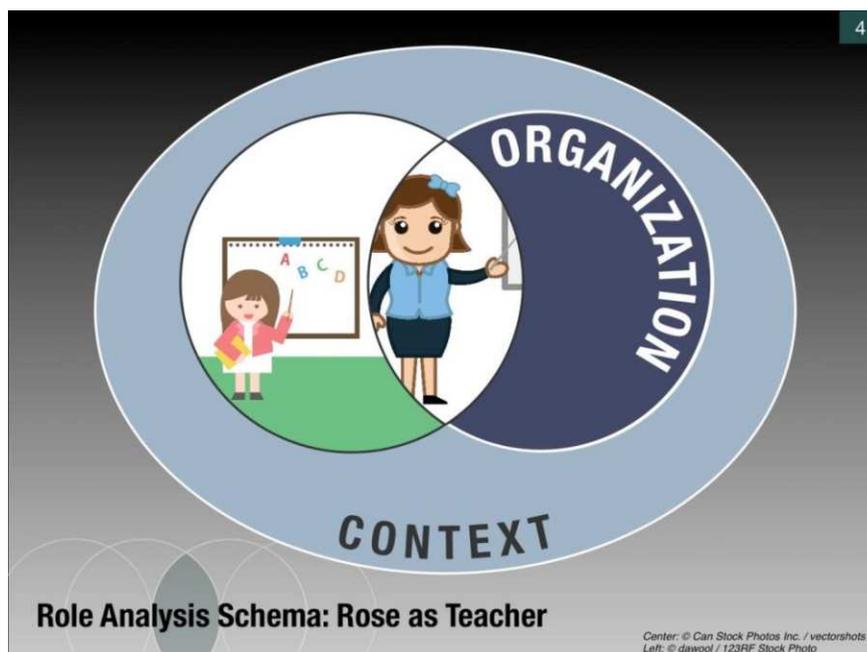
On Monday, Burkard and I will be offering a Role Analysis Workshop. This workshop is based on the concept of role as the space created, mobilized and authorized between the person and the organization. It is the space from which tasks are fulfilled and organizational identity is formed. From our perspective, one's role in an organization is influenced by three very important forces, the personal experiences and strengths that the role holder brings, the expectations and role history coming from the organization and the wider context in which the role sits. For our workshop on Monday, we will ask participants to use this basic schema to draw in these aspects. In so doing, participants will become aware of these influences on how they take up their current (and past) roles. We will then work intensively with these drawings to deepen the insights and learnings for each participant.

From our perspective, role is critical to a psychoanalytic understanding of organizations and one's own identity. We work from the perspective that all relationships in organizations are role relationships. And yet, we often find that participants have great difficulties defining what a role is.

What I would like to do now is to illustrate the concept of role by using the very role I am in today, a conference presenter.

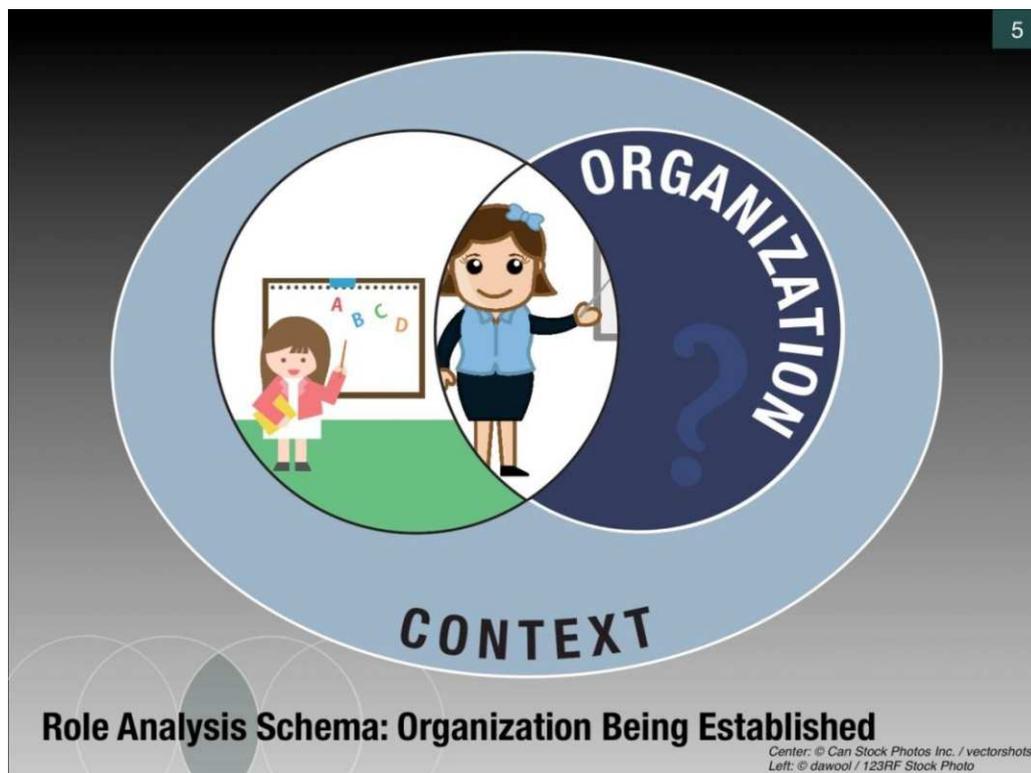


As I have just said, I worked for 20 years as a teacher. This role of teacher is a valuable and intrinsic part of me. And therefore, whenever I present, I bring this role history with me. I always include a bit of teaching, along with the task of presenting theory and case material. Therefore, I can add on the personal side of my role schema the influence of my role as teacher:



Teaching children was my first professional role. It is a part of who I am, which I am sure is true for you, when you reflect on your own first profession. One doesn't shed one's previous role identity. Instead one brings it into the new identity, along with many other influences, such as family life, personal interests, and other skills. So the way I am taking up the role of presenter today is influenced by my own biography and roles that I have had before coming to you today. Teacher is one of them.

As a teacher, I entered a very structured, hierarchical and traditional system. However, today I am entering a new system, your organization.



As it is new, there are not yet any established ways of functioning or traditional procedures for conducting its work. Therefore, on the organizational side of my schema, there really is no history for the role of presenter.

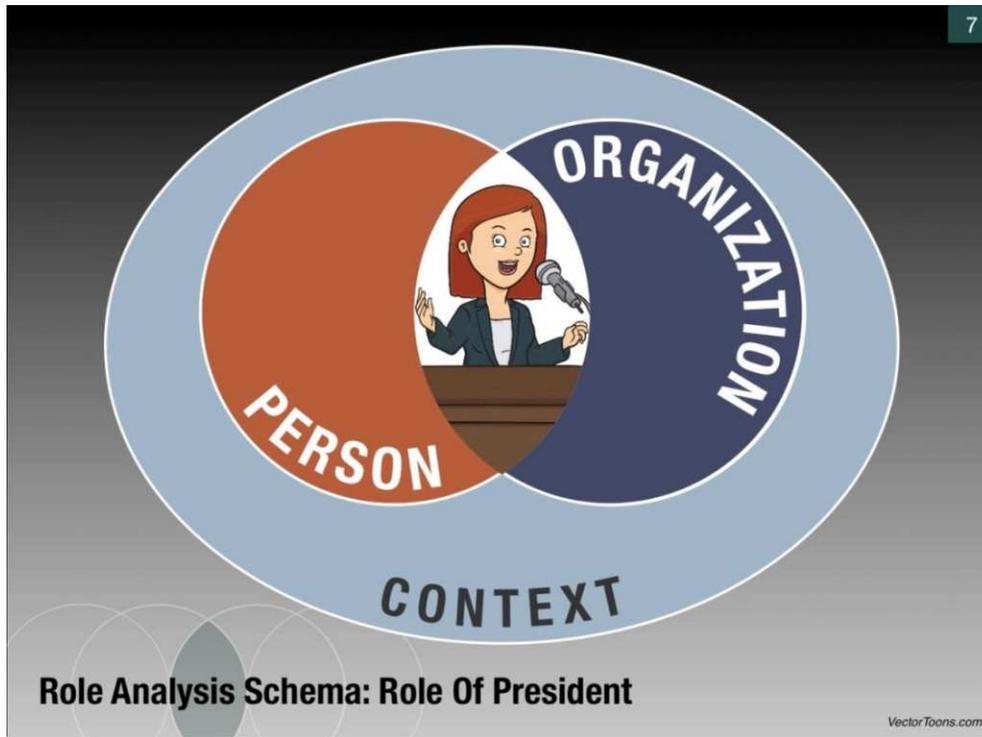
However, looking at the broader perspective of context, there is some guidance.



Context includes the broader professional environment and set of practices and procedures that exist outside of our own direct experience but that function as guidance and role models for how such a professional would conduct oneself and take up such a role. Everyone here is a professional of one sort or another and is, for example, experienced in attending conference presentations and giving them. So we could say that the context gives us some guidance, i.e. how a presenter should take up his or her role.

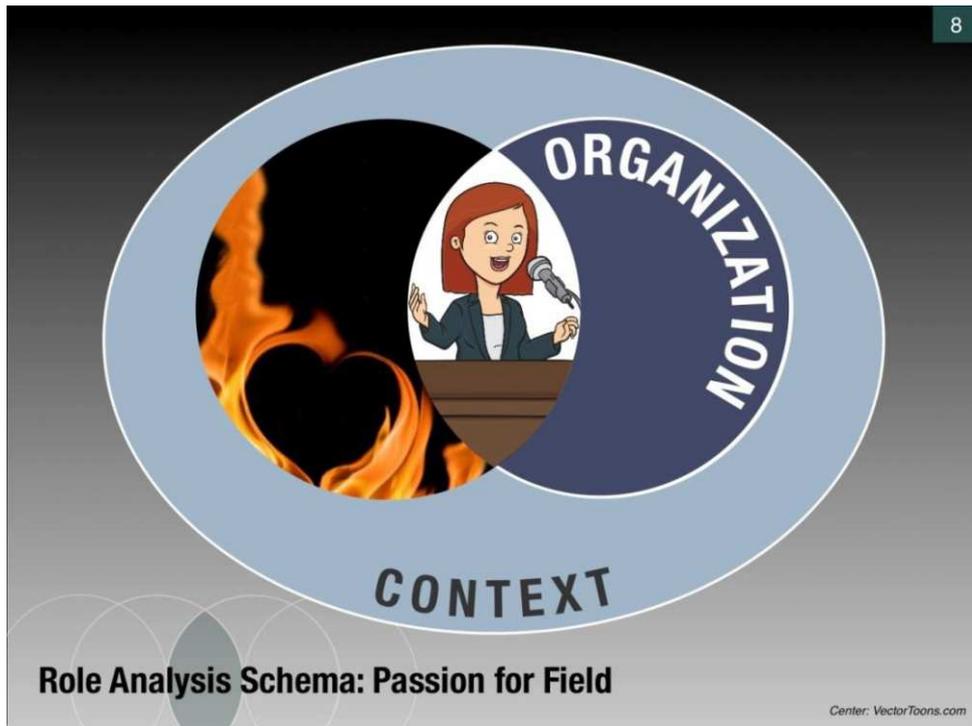
So this means wearing a certain kind of clothes, and standing a certain way and reading or talking, showing power point, providing theory and attempting to convey a set of ideas to an interested audience. This context is highly influential on me as a presenter today, even though this particular system is a new one.

Part Two



I want to turn now to the main topic of this presentation today, which is my experience of taking up the role as the first female president of an international society. In this presentation, I prefer not to name the organization, but instead to emphasize the ways in which the concept of role served to support me with this complicated task and to say something about the context of role-taking in a professional society.

First, a bit of background: Having worked solely in educational systems for twenty years and having been a long-term patient in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, I was very excited to discover the practice and study of organizations from a psychoanalytic perspective. In 1987, by chance, I heard a presentation by the then-president of this society, which had been founded only the year before. I attended my first symposium in 1988, when I was still working in the school system. After attending the next few symposia, I became more and more interested in the organization. I was asked (as a woman) to present a paper, and I was then asked to serve on the board as secretary-treasurer.

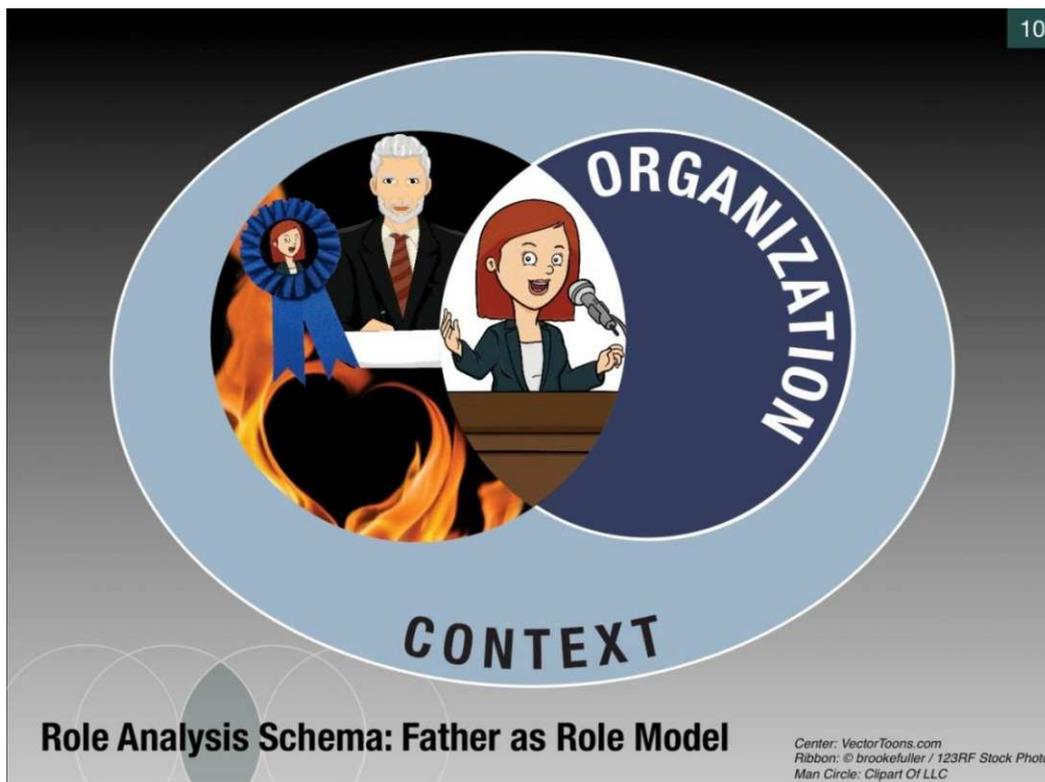


I became filled with a double passion: for the new thinking and for developing the organization. In addition to being a teacher, I had also successfully turned around a series of failing organizations and developing them into successful entities.



One was a community theatre in my town, and the other was a professional development organization for teachers. I had the role of president “in my mind”, having had such success in previous positions. I knew that I could contribute to this society.

In addition to my passion and my experience as a turnaround specialist, I was the oldest daughter of a father who himself had taken the same role in his law fraternity, as international president.



So I had internalized a successful role model.

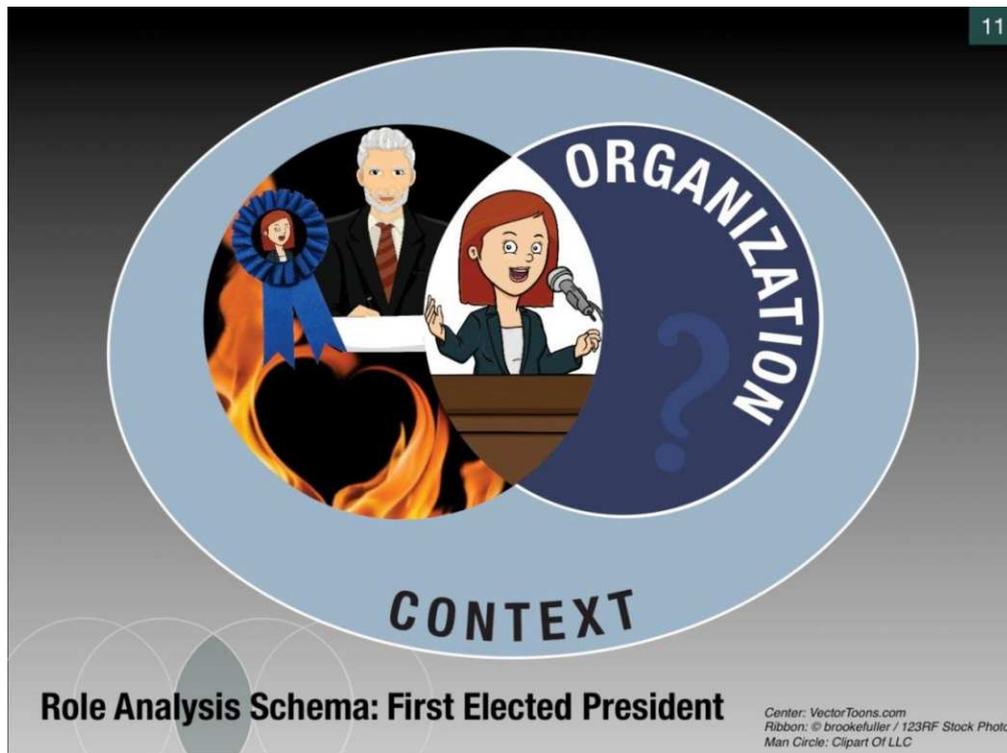
In 1995, I stood for president, along with four men (including one founder). I took the initiative to run, rather than waiting to be asked, which was the history. This was a very daring act.

This was actually the very first time that this organization had held an election for a board position, much less president. First there was a run-off election between all five of us. That election left only two remaining candidates: myself and the founder. To my own amazement and that of many members, I won that run-off election.

I became president at a time when the organization was transitioning from a group of friends and colleagues to an organization with procedures. In

retrospect, I think the membership realized that it was facing a difficult transition and that a trusted outsider was needed for the role.

However this was the first time for this organization that a president was chosen by the whole membership, rather than tapped by the founders. So, like your organization, there was no model for how an elected president would take this role.

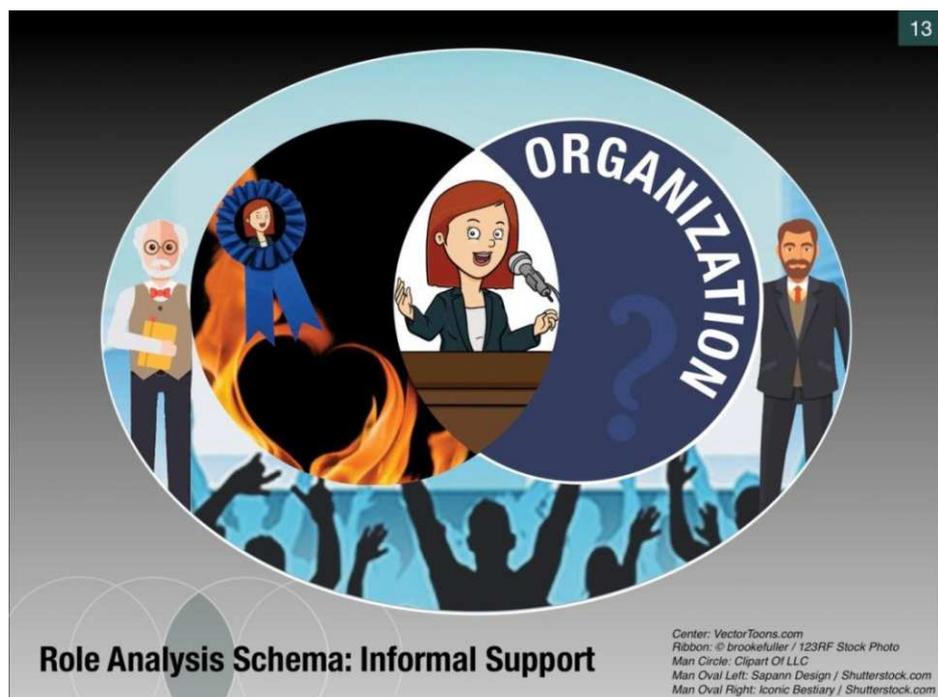


Back my role analysis schema, as I have said, I brought a strength in building strong organizations, which only I knew, but I had absolutely no status in the field. I had not yet published, I had no doctorate, I wasn't really yet a consultant. My only "credential" in the field was my experience as a patient. I did win the election, and I did have many, many supportive colleagues, but that did not translate into experiencing myself as truly authorized in role, since the role of an elected (rather than chosen) president had not previously existed and had no validity.

A major professional organization with a president of such low professional status can experience a kind of loss of self-confidence. And I think for that reason my election caused a great deal of consternation. For the founders themselves, who largely did not support me in the presidential role, my election represented a potential "takeover" of their dear organization. And here, we can look at the context of professional organizations, and the importance of having very high profile people (men) in the lead roles as a further contribution to my insecurity.



So here is a picture of the role situation I was in when I took over the role of president. I had a very strong set of strengths coming into the role, but on the organizational side, no one had taken the role of elected president and the procedure of the election itself had had no precedent. So there was very little organizational authorization and support for this role. And from the context side, my history of patient and teacher in a public school did not match the expectations of someone worthy of such a prominent role. Added to that, many of the founders and high status members did not support me or vote for me.



At the same time, though, I had clearly won a hard fought election and there was much support (informal as it may have been) for me as president. With the support of a supervisor, who was not a founder, I began to understand how my election came about in the context of where the organization was at that time and what my election represented. Not only was it at the cusp between a boys' club (all founders were male) and a legitimate functioning system (with newly minted by laws), it was also transitioning from its founding generation to a broader membership. Somehow enough members trusted me to make this transition work. And it was this sense of trust that guided me in my role taking.

Part Three



During my preparation for this talk, I came upon two different concepts of role to describe my experience as president of this society.

The left side of this schema represents role as “skin”, as covering, as shelter. Here role is seen and experienced as something that wraps around us and protects us. Its positive aspect is that it becomes the identity from which all others in the organization relate to one, regardless of who one is personally. Its negative aspect is that it can be used to distance oneself or protect oneself from interactions and stimulus and learnings coming from others in the system.

For me a key aspect of this way of looking at role is that it gives the role a clear definition. And this definition enables one to fill the role completely. In my

case, with no real status in the field and no history of an elected, much less a female, president, I immediately took the presidential role, as soon as my term began. I wanted to signal to the membership (and to myself) that I intended to be an active role holder. In that way, I felt I could legitimize myself as president. Thus I communicated often and in all kinds of ways, i.e. president's letters, speech at first Members' Day, actively involving members in various activities, maintaining close contact with the board and using board meetings to accomplish tasks important for the organization. The more I was in contact with members undertaking tasks, the more I became authorized in the role.

The right side of this slide represents a different concept of role, that of being an internal structural support, something that can be relied on to give oneself definition and security. It springs from an internal validation of self in role. And it was this metaphor that guided and supported me in coming into the presidency.

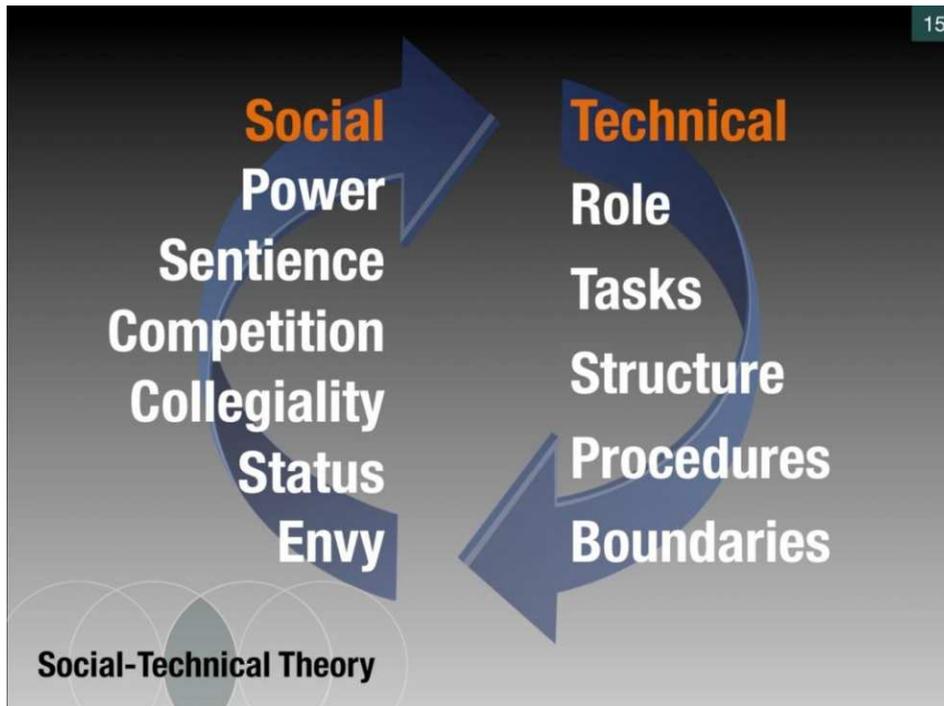
I found that the role infused me with direction. An internally secure role (even if it is not totally authorized by the membership) can connect one to the task and goals of the system. It is a place from which one can work.

I first had to "take" the role, before I could be given the authorization by the system. So the challenge was how to "take" it.

The question of how to take an elected role in this organization involved taking into consideration all of the elements I have described above. Although I often felt quite alone and vulnerable, I knew from experience that I could, so to say, trust myself. Here are some of the key steps that I took:

1. Undertook supervision from a colleague outside of the core founding group
2. Relied on an exceptionally insightful executive director
3. Never publicly criticised others in the organization and never took sides for or against colleagues involved in disputes. I soon learned that often the cause of such disputes had to do with experiences of either being rejected or not chosen by that colleague. I learned that even the most high status members were as vulnerable as I was, in their own way.
4. Communicated like crazy, through speeches, letters, emails and just showing up at meetings being well organized and clear about tasks and goals.
5. Strengthened procedures: membership, etc.
6. Made key appointments of people who, on the one side, were well respected, and, on the other side, supported me as president.

I also relied on what I knew and had experienced before and as a theoretical support, I relied on Social-Technical Theory.



Socio-technical theory holds that there is interrelatedness between the social and technical components of organizations.

Professional organizations, as a general rule, must constantly contend with dynamics that at any point threaten to overwhelm and compromise the system. One must never underestimate the fierce competition between members and the desire for prestige and reputation that often motivate members to take on important roles. I was certainly no exception.

One must take a particular look at the special dynamics of a professional society, when thinking about the role of the president or any other prominent role. Professional societies are composed of colleagues in the same field and are, for them, a means by which they can express and share their intellectual products and also a means by which they can compare their own abilities with like colleagues. These are very sentient organizations, meaning that the relationship between members involves a lot of emotional content. Often academic members in such organizations are the only ones with this perspective who work at their own institution. One looks for fellow thinkers when one joins a society. One has a sense of “belonging”. At the same time, however, one must manage the competitive feelings that naturally arise and the humiliation of one’s work being rejected or not being elected to the board.

When we look at this society as a socio-technical system, these dynamics strongly characterize the social force field, which helps us to understand why it is that organizational professionals have so much difficulty looking at their own

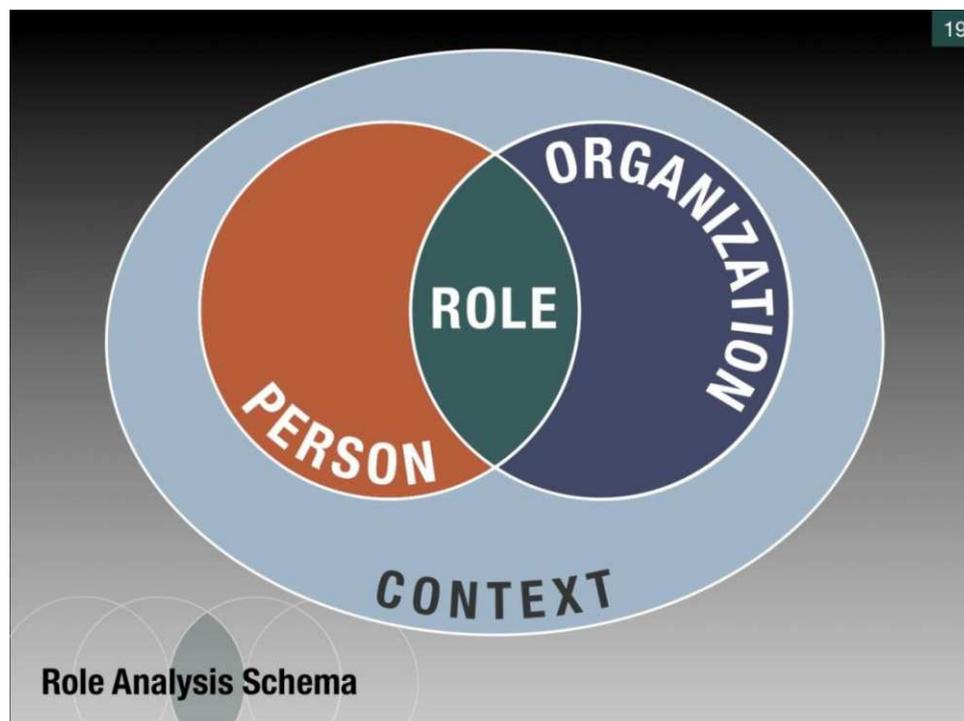
societies. In order to contain these forces, the technical system – which, unlike the social system, can be experienced as neutral and facilitating -- needs to be designed to cope and manage these impulses. This has particular implications for the role of president, who must always hold the whole system in mind.

In such an organization, I would like to argue, the technical processes must be seen as fair and consistent. Certain ways of operating need to become established, i.e. clear membership criteria, a transparent decision-making process for accepting papers to be presented at symposia, fair election procedures. And, probably more importantly, certain informal sets of assumptions begin to form. One such assumption, for example, would be that someone elected president not use this position to overtly promote his or own professional goals, but, in this role, serve the organization.

It was this mantra that guided me in the way I took up the role, and I believe that it set a standard for many of the presidential role holders who followed me.

Conclusion:

Today I have been talking about a role that I took up as president of a professional society. I have discussed three major external influences on how one takes up a role (personal, organization, context) and two metaphors for how one might think of taking a role (a skin protection, a supportive skeleton). I have described the particular dynamics of professional organizations and the implications for leadership.



If I were advising anyone about a role, I would ask them to look at the three elements in the Role Analysis Schema (see above). One way to think of these three is that, while ideally they form a balance, in reality these elements vary in intensity and impact from organization to organization.

One way to begin the process of working with clients, even clients who don't know what the concept of role means, is to have them draw this schema and fill in the circles. This is exactly what we will be doing in the role workshop tomorrow. There are special ways to work with such drawings, both in groups and in the coaching dyad, which we will demonstrate.

As a coach or consultant to someone taking up a new role, you can help your clients investigate in depth these realms, identify the deeper issues influencing them and develop thoughtful strategies to enhance role performance.

Thank you so very much for your attention and interest. I look forward to your thoughts and questions.