

A NON-HIERARCHICAL EXPERIMENT TURNED INTO A TRADITIONAL HIERARCHY: Examining formal and informal hierarchy dynamics of the Verge conference team



What issues might arise in the search for flat hierarchies, network structures and decentralization of project management? What role might informal hierarchies play in the unexpected unfolding of events? Is a flat hierarchy even possible – and if so, is it desirable? Using Verge as a case study – a student-led three day conference happening under the umbrella of the Transdisciplinary Design program at Parsons in New York City – I seek to examine the above-mentioned topics. As a theoretical lens to better understand the dynamics at play, I have consulted the research article “Formal and informal hierarchies in different types of organizations” by Thomas Dieffenbach and John A.A. Silence.

As part of the Transdisciplinary program at Parsons, we are introduced to concepts such as network structure, self-organizing systems and emergence. It’s a highly collaborative program, founded upon ethics of co-creation, learning together, and the questioning of “the expert”. Through creative interventions we seek to transform the systems of our societies in a more sustainable and resilient direction, working across disciplines, hierarchies and barriers in the process. Embodying these ideals in practice are however more complicated than one might

think, a lesson learnt by this year's Verge team. On a surface level, the conference was professionally and meticulously delivered, receiving praise from visitors and faculty alike. Behind the scenes stood a shattered team, frustrations, people feeling forced into roles and workloads they had not intended to take on, others feeling disrespected and used. The non-hierarchical experiment had turned into a traditional hierarchy in a process where no one stood as the winner.

As part of my research, I have conducted eleven in-depth interviews, with five second year students and six first year students. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, with a special focus on the dynamics of formal and informal hierarchies, which seem to have played a major role in the way things unfolded.

Pre-organizational phase: Motivations and thoughts

So what were the initial reasonings behind the idea of a flat hierarchy? In the Fall of 2016, a group of five second year students – who had all with the exception of one student participated in the planning of the previous Verge conference – came together to design a structure for this year's event that would function as a platform for their collaboration with the first years. The previous year, the Verge conference was set-up as a traditional hierarchy with the main responsibility resting on the three Directors, with sub teams responsible for specific areas. Positions were assigned according to an application process monitored by the second years.

This year, there was a consensus among the students that had participated last year, that the workload and pressure put on the Directors was not desirable, and that there “should be simple ways to specify more tasks to more people”. They looked into the concept of a holocracy, a flat hierarchy with core teams or circles, designed to open up for leadership to emerge. “We didn't want people to feel like they're only following orders, and by making the first years feel like Verge is also theirs, we expected them to be more motivated and feel more responsible for the outcome”.

In this quest, they also joined a global search for more flat structures, a desire away from the top-down approaches of the traditional bureaucracy, and a belief that this will increase commitment and motivation. This is described in “Formal and informal (...)” as a belief that

hybrid or postmodern organizations with “quasi-autonomous teams, self-managing projects and decentralized work units could supersede old forms of hierarchal power and control” (1516). The initial design of Verge also shows elements of what is labelled as “network organizations: fully decentralized entities comprising (seemingly) truly autonomous, self-directed and participative units” (1516), with “decentralized co-ordination and decision-making, emerging formal functions and tasks within the network” (1517).

First phase: Connecting first and second years in pursuit of common goal

Introduced to the idea of a flat hierarchy and an opportunity to learn and develop Verge together, first years boarded Verge to contribute to the general Trans D community and support their discipline and program. They were encouraged to join teams they didn't have much experience of, and were told they would get the support to own these roles. They all understood that the second years wanted them to take initiative, but many were struggling to understand what this meant. “In the beginning they guided us, and made it clear they wanted us to figure things out by ourselves. This was difficult, not knowing what was in it for us. I think we all struggled to find our connection to what Verge was.” The general feeling was one of vagueness and confusion. “What were the expectations of us? What were even the opportunities to take initiative?”. Not knowing who to report to, where to turn for advice, what the tasks, roles and responsibilities were, or how to make decisions, most first years struggled to figure out “what they were meant to do” and what “Verge even was”.

First phase: Sense making among the second years

As events unfolded, many of the second years interpreted the behavior of the first years as passivity and lack of reliability. “People were looking for explicit guidance; what's the next step? They were fixated on us and wanted to be told what to do. No one wanted to be responsible.” Comparisons were made to their experiences of previous years, where they “were always in situations of not knowing what to do and had to come up with our own solutions. This cohort was not comfortable with uncertainty or risk-taking the way we were. They immediately put themselves in a subordinate position in relation to us, which was difficult to manage”.

Second phase: Informal hierarchies between first and second years emerging

To understand some of the dynamics at play as the work went on, and how the unintended positions of hierarchical leaders and subordinates grew more cemented along the way, we will now turn to the concept of informal hierarchies. As pointed out in “Formal and informal (...)”, various forms of organizations striving for non-hierarchical ideals oftentimes display very traditional patterns of hierarchical relations despite the lack of formal hierarchies, in conflict with their self-image and ideals. “In particular, post-modern representative democratic and network organizations are much less “alternative” and hierarchy free than their labels and common understanding may suggest” (intro). This can be explained by different dynamics between formal and informal hierarchies, with the key tendency that “whenever in common types of organizations formal hierarchy decreases, informal hierarchy increases” (intro), making postmodern and hybrid as well as network structures extra sensitive to the emergence of informal hierarchies.

So what might these informal hierarchies consist of in the case of Verge and how did they emerge and cement themselves? According to Dieffenbach and Silence, “teams, projects or similar so called ‘collaborative work’ arrangements and environments, often mean more pressure and more gentle ways of informal coercive control and punishment for the individual than most external methods” (1526). This is exemplified by the experience of most first years, that as they started taking initiatives of their own according to their idea of what Verge was or what it could be, they were confronted by second years with “how things should be” or “what Verge is”. “It was very messy, we started working on the program item of “conversations” and were then told that, ‘no that’s not what conversations are’. We advanced and had to go back constantly. There was a lot of language used that already had a lot of meaning attached to it, which made it inaccessible for first years.” Another first year student points out that “in theory the second years had the autonomy to make decisions about the branding, and I do too. So in theory they were not supposed to tell people what to do, but they did. They would talk about the “Verge spirit” – how could we possibly know what this is? Why can’t we come up with something new?”. The general sense being that there was initially no feedback, no one to report to or check in with, but later their work would be criticized according to a right way of doing things. Particular figures among the second years would fluctuate between the role of leader/authority figure and supporter, creating confusion among the first years as to how to act, who to listen to

for direction, and what framework to work within. “It was difficult to take charge when we’re constantly relating to how it’s “supposed” to be and the second years already knew what they wanted and how things should be run. Much energy was spent on figuring out what’s in the heads of the second years.”

As described in “Formal and informal (...)”, the kind of hierarchies that emerge in network or hybrid settings, are often “difficult to challenge and even harder to escape from”, covering up “more intense forms of formal and informal control with their official rhetoric of teamwork, projects, employee participation, commitment, motivation and empowerment” (1527). The “invisible norm” (that only the second years have access to) of what Verge is can be seen to function as such a control mechanism, and a clear indication of an (unspoken, informal) hierarchy that was in place from the very start. One first year says: “Many of the first years wanted less academic language and would develop the communication according to this. Someone among the second years would then change it back. We never even discussed to who we are speaking, how we speak, who gets to decide”. Someone else says “Whenever I suggested alternative approaches to the conference, many of the second years would issue opinions as if they are facts. They would just say it’s nice with traditions, or that it would be confusing for an audience to change anything at all about the conference.” The general sense among the first years was that they were working to fulfill someone else’s agenda, but not being sure whose agenda and what that agenda was. “We were treated as the hands, not the brains.”

One of the second years, the only one who had not been involved the year before, describes a situation where frustration was building up in both cohorts. “With my lack of experience from last year, I ended up kind of in-between first and second years. I felt like second years weren’t genuine to what they were trying to do in terms of a flat hierarchy. It became kind of an informal club who would sometimes take me aside and complain about how I was acting in front of first years and things not getting done in the proper way. I realized they were really steering the ship.” The space to properly express or reflect on the process together was not there, with the result that both sides seemed to somehow “gang up”. “There was a lot of frustration that was not expressed. I tried to bridge this divide in micro groups, but it was too much of a burden to take on with all the responsibilities I had as part of the production team. In the end I had to leave the group because of a fear of getting burnt out”.

Third phase: Power struggles among informal leadership

As explained in “Formal and informal (...)”, a common dynamic in organizations with little or no formal hierarchies, is the emergence of power struggles because of a “constant need for internal positioning of oneself and bargaining with, and against, each other” (1527). This dynamic of a “strong informal principle of continuous hierarchal positioning at work is often not less but more hierarchical and oppressive than other hierarchical regimes – but in more differentiated and challenging, sublime and sophisticated ways” (1527). In the case study of Verge, there are clear indications that these kinds of power struggles unintentionally developed along with the emergence of informal leadership.

From early on in the process, the production team was seen by many of the first years as the coordinators or the “Directors” of the conference. One of the first years in particular was regarded by many of the other first years as the Director of Verge, with her group as Co-Directors. When the second year who feared burn out left this group, many first years experienced a clear shift in the direction of the conference. “We were wondering what was going on and ended up not trusting what we were doing even more.” With also a second person leaving the group, the informal “Director”, as perceived by the other first year students, was left alone. One of the first years says: “She responded to the situation by trying to merge our teams with her. One of the second years found out and was upset that we had not consulted her. What followed was a big meeting to discuss what happened, where it was very clear to us that there was much tension between the various “informal Directors” of the conference.” The general sense among the first years that whatever they did had an impact on a power struggle and an informal hierarchy they did not understand. “When we took agency, like the person we considered the Director did, we were faced with so much resistance. We didn’t even know these norms in terms of decision making were in place until we were confronted. This particular confrontation was much more negative than positive. The feedback given to “our Director” from the second years was that she was trying to create a divide. People felt disabled, and this person was pushed out of her role as Director/Producer.” The way she left was also experienced as very different from when other people left the team. “When she left it was through the back door. There was no announcement that there was a change. I think she felt that after that point, nothing she did would be helpful.” The end result for the entire group was a feeling of a vacuum with no specific structure for decision-making. In the words of a first year:

“After these first few months, everybody hated Verge. Everyone was confused as to how to move forward.”

Fourth phase: The informal hierarchy turns into a formal hierarchy

When informal hierarchy emerges and is cemented into the structure of a team, the result, as pointed out in “Formal and informal (...)”, might be the formation of a traditional formal hierarchy. This took place in Verge over the winter break. As described by one of the second years: “One of our advisors reached out to me and said she needed specific things. I took matters into my own hands. If I see people are not doing the work, I have a tendency to step in and do it for them. It’s nothing I intended for but when time became precious it just happened that way, and I became the node for everything. Work was now centralized to five or seven people and there was a silent agreement that the second years from now on make the decision. It went back to a traditional hierarchy, “I have the vision, these are the tasks, what can you do?”.

In the meantime most of the first years had disconnected from Verge over the break. “When we came back most of us resented the hierarchy that was introduced but we also knew that without it things would not get done”. Along with the restructuring many of the first years lost ownership of the tasks they were assigned to do. “People would ‘take’ my tasks and communicate it to me afterwards. It was very disempowering, and things started getting so disrespectful. I would hear some of the second years speak about me over my head, about what they needed me for when”. Another first year student says: “The energy was so bad I just wanted to stick it out. The enthusiasm was already low by the time they took over though, they didn’t take it from people who were dying to be in charge. By the end of the conference I just wanted to sit down and cry”. One of the second years who were in charge towards the end says: “At the end we all felt burnt out, with some of our thesis work suffering more than others. I felt very proud of the external feedback that we all got, with people flying in from other universities, seeing Verge as a model. What I regret was the lack of overall happiness in the group.”

Moving forward – what are learnings for coming years?

In conclusion, I would like to propose a few considerations for coming years, based on feedback from second as well as first year students. In this attempt, I strive to present a brief discussion

that is nuanced, reflective and points towards a process that does not end up in the “either-or” polarity of centralization/hierarchy or decentralization/flat hierarchy. Instead, based on the experiences from this year’s Verge, I seek to in more general terms understand how a generative space might appear, where people feel motivated, included, and aligned with the purpose of the shared work.

Taking account for a hierarchy that was already in place

Going into the planning of Verge, it’s important for the second year cohort to recognize the inherent hierarchy based on different levels of experience. This dynamic easily feeds “people’s almost automatic willingness to take over social roles, behaviors and attitudes of dominance or obedience”, tendencies that “are much more part of social systems than contemporary research might suggest” (1530). One of the second years says “A flat hierarchy is difficult when the separation between cohorts is already there. This “wall” needs to be broken first, which is something that takes time and effort”. Another says that “We didn’t take into account that people don’t know what Verge or Trans D is. It’s too much to learn at the same time, and we needed to be prepared for this. They haven’t gone through what we’ve gone through. Just because you announce a flat hierarchy it’s not going to magically appear.” Adding to this, a representative from the administration suggested during a Verge debrief meeting that “if you want to break down barriers and have first year students take initiative, don’t wait for this leadership to emerge. Assign them leadership roles directly”.

Put as much focus on process as outcome and create moments for collective reflection

To mitigate the risk for the emergence of destructive hierarchies, whatever structure you exercise in relation to formal hierarchies, there is a clear need to “reflect critically along the way on your social and communicative practices” (1530). One second year says: “Since we got started so late we felt like we didn’t have time for those pause moments to reflect. I would have liked for us to have built more humility into the process. We’re always talking about changing all these systems in our program but we don’t even take the time to understand our own social systems.” Expressed was also a need for more support from faculty and surrounding institutional eco systems in this quest of managing and understanding team dynamics. “How

can we give better feedback to each other? Practice self reflection and communicate our expectations and frustrations along the way?”.

**Create a good balance between preserving the tradition of Verge and opening up
for the idea of what Verge is to change**

As exemplified through the interviews, the perception of an invisible norm and a set agenda for what Verge is and should be, seems to be one of the main reasons for the emergence of strong informal hierarchies and power struggles. It also served as a general source of frustration for first years, who were not able to shape the outcome in ways that were true also to their beliefs or ideas of what Transdisciplinary Design could or should be. One first year says: “I joined Verge to see what it can be. Verge could be a range of things! It’s nothing if you only try to copy something from previous years.” Many of the first years also wanted the conference to be open and accessible to a broader audience, with more focus on community and sustainability than a professional outcome targeted towards the design industry. “Could these things be re-prioritized? Now it seems like it was more promotion than community”. In order to overcome this misalignment of core values as well as criteria for success, I would recommend a thorough discussion at the beginning of the process, as well as along the process itself, to align goals and motivations of senior students and the incoming cohort.

Exercise polarity management¹ when considering centralization vs. decentralization

Considering the dynamics of formal and informal hierarchies, and the fact that “hierarchy is still the backbone and central nervous system of our organizations – even the postmodern ones” (1530), I would recommend a more sensible approach to the idea of a formal hierarchy, examining the pros and cons and various scenarios to watch out for in centralized as well as decentralized structures. One of the second years says: “It’s easy to just dismiss hierarchy as ‘bad’. There’s a reason it’s there. We should have come in prepared and aware of the difficulties and that it’s a process that takes time. Failure is part of that process.” One of the first years says: “I work well with hierarchies. I like reporting to someone, having clear roles, delegating tasks. It’s very frustrating to decide everything as a team.”

¹ A concept coined by Barry Johnson, founder of “Polarity Management Associates”.

As the final words pointing forward I will let another first year student speak: “According to my experience a top-down approach works better when you want to get for instance logistical things done. If you want to create a really rewarding experience however it might not be the best way to go about things. In my undergrad I worked with flat hierarchies, where we had established a sense of unity before we started working together. We had missions and goals set, a unified language and a strong bond. This is why it ended up working out for us”.