

The Transformation of the Subud Organization

By Hadrian Michell

As each of us practice and build up on what we receive in latihan, we necessarily change, and that change has an effect on the way we organize – but as with most human systems there is a time-lag between that change happening and those changes being expressed in the outer organization.

A chance meeting with Steven Hancock (then SESI chair) at a Zone meeting in Switzerland in 2003 led me to form a team and to organize a series of seven ‘global enterprise meetings’ around the world. Steven was meant to moderate our first meeting in South Africa in 2004, but was prevented from coming due to ill-health and his absence led us to run our meetings in an intentionally leaderless manner.

Thus we discovered the amazing power, freedom and creativity that arises once hierarchies, functions and roles are intentionally and consciously eliminated. We discovered a form of outer organization which mirrored the true leaderlessness which we experience in our latihan – an aware group consciously guided by unseen yet tangible forces.

I wrote a book describing these experiences, and two other books appeared at about the same time with similar experiences in the non-Subud world,* both claiming that leaderless groups were the future of organizations, bringing in equality, creativity and a resolution of conflict. A group of us introduced this organizational idea to the Swiss national committee a few years ago; the chairperson was replaced by a leaderless group – a group which went through an interesting process and which ultimately, in May 2010, realized that the organization can only get in the way of members doing their latihan – and so Subud Switzerland dissolved itself. Alternative forms of organization are currently being discussed.

In retrospect, what happened in Switzerland was that the organization went through a process of moving from responsibility being assumed by a committee for its members (the default setting in Subud) to a situation where each member has to accept their share of the responsibility for the whole of Subud in their country.

Very liberating for most – very frightening for some.

Maybe I am being too optimistic, but I see what happened in Switzerland as a precursor for the whole Subud world – in which the members of each country come together and decide for themselves the nature of the way they wish to be organized. Just as the latihan is the same for each of us but adapted to our own individuality, each country will develop a model appropriate for itself.

I guess it happened first in Switzerland because it is a mature Subud country, and the nature of its outer political organization is one of self-responsibility, with public referenda on important issues.

Similarly, we introduced the leaderless model early in 2007 to the members of Subud

Christchurch who were planning to organize the 2010 World Congress, and they enthusiastically adopted the idea. However this led to ongoing conflicts with ISC, who (without being aware of it) operated in the old command-and-control model and had real difficulty relating to a body without a chairperson.

All of the above illustrates what to me seems a subtle but very real process of transformation behind the scenes in the Subud world – a process which merely follows the increase of awareness and increasing spiritual maturity amongst members of the Subud community. Amazingly this process seems to be occurring within a generation of Bapak's passing and I feel may be complete within a few short years, at the end of which we could possibly have a Subud organization which is 'fit for purpose' – an organization which is capable of sustaining a much larger membership, which it truly serves.

While Bapak was still with us, there was no question that he had a unique level of insight, awareness and power – and that the then organizational model, which was in effect a 'benevolent dictatorship', was appropriate for that time.

As I see it, at the end of this current process of transformation we will have an organization which represents a true form of social democracy, in which the members themselves become the decision-making-body, and each individual member will carry her or his share of responsibility for Subud in the world – without there being any 'leader' or 'chairperson' to take any of that responsibility away from them.

Just like in Switzerland – liberating for most – scary for some.

Although I am unsure of the detail of how this will work, the stages of development are already present with the increasing presence of a number of online networks such as SubudVision, SubudWiki, SubudForum and many more – networks on which Subud members gather to share and communicate common concerns.

These forums are merely an outer expression of our inner engagement – with many more members participating than the limited numbers involved in national and international organizations.

As I wrote at the beginning of this article, there is always a time-lag between a change happening with members and that change being seen in the organization, and so we currently have national and international organizations which still operate in the 'benevolent dictator' model, and are blinded, by virtue of how they are organized, to the rapid changes beyond their vision. It was ever thus, e.g. the French and Russian revolutions, whenever an elite believes that it has the authority to represent those outside itself.

Such a gap in awareness between the thinking majority and the tiny number of function-holders inevitably leads to strange situations and unintended consequences.

Today we have, for example, a World Subud Association which increasingly resembles an *Ancien Régime* or a Politburo, an organization dependent upon members' contributions which then spends nearly \$100,000 per annum paying some of its members honoraria and salaries, runs increasing deficits and fails to provide audited accounts for years – and members scratch their heads asking, in what way are they being served?

Many of us watched with incredulity in Christchurch as the ‘New Team’ was being presented on the stage at the end of Congress – a scene reminiscent of Soviet Party congresses; ‘naïf and cringe-worthy’ a young member was heard to comment.

But of course we know that the individuals making up these bodies are sincere Subud members, doing their best in often difficult circumstances, feeling that they represent and serve us all.

Like the Swiss committee before them, they sincerely believe in what they do – but sadly the WSA have a chairperson and thus they cannot benefit from the insights available to a leaderless group, unless they too agree to dissolve themselves out of a sense of integrity. As they cannot do that, then this task will eventually fall to us: the free members of the international Subud community.

The Subud organization is an anachronism if seen in the light of the changes in the world facilitated by online networks. We have a delegate system which is representative only in the way voting systems are representative of the people in democracies – which is to say not at all in reality, because those who claim to represent us mainly represent themselves. In the UK many members of parliament have been found stealing large sums of taxpayers’ money (normal procedure in most countries – merely hidden from view); while in Subud we have a Zonal chair who was told to vote a certain way at the Malvern meeting (against the motion asking for the WSA chair to be paid a honorarium) and decided merely to abstain. He is now being asked to explain his behavior by the members.

Slowly it is dawning on members around the world that office-holders such as WSA members do their ‘work’ mainly for their own growth and development – their travels, meetings and costs paid for out of members’ contributions. At times this awareness dawns on the office-holders themselves – and those with integrity resign.

In Subud, as in the world beyond, true democracy cannot exist with the systems we use at present to organize ourselves: that much is very clear.

Seen from a higher perspective, however, the Subud world is necessarily only a mirror, at a certain level, of the much more populous world beyond – a world which is also going through its own series of transformations: economic and social crises, crises of governments, crises of individual lives.

If the end result of all of these transformations manifests in the Subud world as a new form of true social democracy, then it will perhaps be only a matter of time before the same consciousness reaches out into that wider world with the tremendous changes that such a mass acceptance of individual responsibility inevitably brings with it.

Perhaps only then will many more people outside Subud begin to realize what the transformative nature of the latihan really means, and only then will we within Subud be ready with a form or organization in which equality, sincerity and compassion are not mere words but are enshrined in a system of human organization without leaders, function-holders or moderators – a system in which a higher power is consciously accepted as a tangible, all-present, guiding force.

*The three books cited above:

The Leadership Delusion: Travels in Search of a New Organizational Model for the 21st Century, by John Michell, 2007. ISBN:978-0-9557826-0-2

The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations, by Rod A. Beckstrom & Ori Brafman, 2007. ISBN: 978-1591841432

The Myth of Leadership: Creating Leaderless Organizations, by Jeffrey S. Nielsen, 2004.
ISBN: 978-0891061991