

## The Emery-Trist Levels of Organizational Environments

In 1965, Frederick Emery and Eric Trist developed four models of organizational environments. The Emery-Trist levels of organizational environments include four main organizational types: The placid, randomized environment; the placid, clustered environment; the disturbed, reactive environment; and the turbulent field environment.

- The placid, randomized environment refers to the most simple form of organizational environment in which resources, goals, and values are distributed randomly and remain unchanging. Inputs, such as resources, goals, and values, are distributed at a constant pace or frequency. The organizational environment survives without much knowledge or direction on the part of its members. Adaptability and capability are low in the placid, randomized environment.
- The placid, clustered environment refers to the semi-complex form of organizational environment in which resources, goals, and values are unchanging and located in clusters. Examples of clusters include segmented markets, vendors, and products. In a placid, clustered environment, the organization's survival is linked to its ability to connect the right specialized knowledge, processes, and technologies with their corresponding cluster. Placid, clustered environments need to develop multiple specialized competencies for each cluster.
- The disturbed, reactive environment refers to scenarios in which multiple social systems dominate the same environments. In disturbed, reactive environments, the social systems are dependent on one another. The survival of systems in disturbed, reactive environments depends on the system's knowledge of other system's reactive behavior as well as their resources, values, and goals.
- The turbulent field environment refers to chaotic scenarios in which there are no clear cause and effect relationships between the organizational system and its environment. There are constant external fluctuations and uncertainties. An organization's survival in a turbulent field environment is dependent upon the organization's knowledge of the

changing environment and its ability to endure sustained emotional stress. Surviving turbulent field environments requires high amounts of adaptability and copability.

The Emery-Trist levels of organizational environments, described above, have different levels of adaptability and copability. Organizational environments vary in their decision-making, information processing, tolerance for frustration, competence, and needs. Ultimately, organizational managers and leaders need to have extensive knowledge of the internal characteristics of the system and the external environment (Motamedi, 1977).

<http://www.enotes.com/research-starters/organizational-environment>

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*But there are also unfavorable trends arising from the maladaptive defenses. These are producing conditions to which no adaptation is possible at all. They denote a fifth environment with characteristics of a vortex, signs of which already exist in certain parts of complex societies (emery & Trist, 1973, p. xiv). For our purposes, we found it necessary to distinguish only four levels of organization of environments. Any attempt to conceptualize a higher order of environmental complexity would probably involve us in notions similar to vortical processes. We have not pursued this because we cannot conceive of adaptation occurring in such fields. Edgar Allen Poe did go into this problem in his short story "Descent into the Maelstrom". He intuited that there was a survival tactic if drawn into a whirlpool - namely to emulate an inanimate object. To strive in one's own way was to perish. Folklore and natural history are full of similar lessons about "playing possum", [and] "playing dead". For our purposes we are inclined to regard these as survival tactics rather than adaptive behavior. In case there may be something to the hunch that a type V environment has the dynamics of a vortex it is worthwhile noting that vortices develop at system boundaries when one is moving or evolving very fast relative to the other - like a Watts County L.A. - and between the developed and underdeveloped countries (Emery & Trist, 1973, p. 41).*

Although not central to our discussion, the above quotations from Emery and Trist postulate a fifth level of environment. In their subsequent writings, they did not go beyond these statements, possibly because actual or emerging vortical environments were not numerous enough to warrant directing their interest away from the overwhelming salience of the turbulent environment of the 1960's and the 1970's in the world. Crombie (1972) had also commented briefly on the vortical environment, suggesting that the environment takes on some of the properties of a vortex or a whirlpool so that it may have the capacity to swallow up or engulf anything that approaches it.

<http://moderntimesworkplace.com/archives/ericssess/sessvol3/BABUR06p203.pdf>

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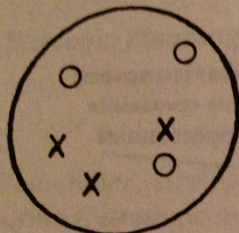
following pages from Participative Design for Participative Democracy, edited by Merrelyn Emery, summary table and images from the book.

Environment	Description	Examples	Time Period	Learning	Planning	Management	Values	Ideals	Goals	Milestones
<b>I - Random, Placid</b>	Engineered	Concentration Camp	--	Conditioning	Tactics	System Resources	Access, Familiarity	Belonging	Survival	--
<b>II - Clustered, Placid</b>	Stable	Farming Community	Prehistory to Industrial Age	Meaningful	Tactics, Strategy	System, Planning	Knowledge	Nurturance	Security, Community	Language, Mathematics, Religion, Government
<b>III - Disturbed, Reactive</b>	Competitive	Auto Industry	Industrial Age	Problem Solving	Tactics, Strategy, Operational Plans	System, Planning, Learning	Understanding, Compassion	Humanity	Health, Safety, Fairness	Labor Unions, Insurance Industry, War Crimes
<b>IV - Turbulent</b>	Dynamic	Information Technology	Post-Industrial	Puzzle Learning	Adaptive Planning	System, Planning, Learning, Environment	Motivation, Desire, Balance, Elegance	Beauty	Learning, Challenge, Respect, Meaning, Hope	Personal Responsibility, Global Information, New Spirituality, Lifelong Learning
<b>V- Vortical</b>	Anarchy	Rawanda, Somalia	--							



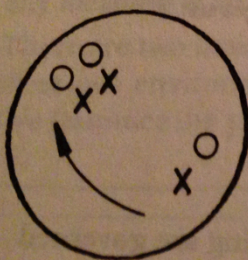
**Fig. 6. The Causal Texture of Social Environments**  
*Extended Fields of Directive Correlations*

**Type 1. Random Placid**



Goals and noxiants randomly distributed. Strategy is tactic. 'Grab it if it's there'. Largely theoretical or micro, design, e.g., concentration camps, conditioning experiments. Nature is not random.

**Type 2. Clustered Placid**

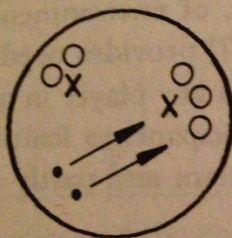


Goals and noxiants are lawfully distributed — meaningful learning. Simple strategy—maximize goals, e.g., use fire to produce new grass. Most of human span spent in this form. Hunting, gathering, small village. What most people mean by the 'good old days'.

**Fig. 7.**

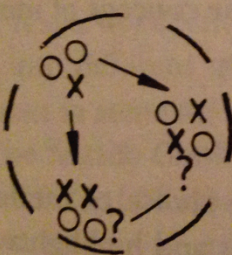
**Type 3. Disturbed Reactive**

Type 2 with two or more systems of one kind *competing* for same resources. Operational planning emerges to out-manoeuvre the competition. Requires extra knowledge of both Ss and E. E is stable



so start with set of givens and concentrate on problem solving for win-lose game. Need to create instruments that are variety-reducing (foolproof)—elements must be standardized and interchangeable. Birth of bureaucratic structures where people are redundant parts. Concentrate power at the top—strategy becomes a power game.

**Type 4. Turbulent**



Dynamic, not placid/stable. Planned change in type 3 triggers off unexpected social processes. Dynamism arises from the field itself, creating unpredictability and increasing *relevant uncertainty* and its *continuities*. Linear planning impossible, e.g., whaling disrupted reproduction, people react to being treated as parts of machine. Birth of open systems thinking, ecology and catastrophe theory.

\*Where O = goals (goodies) and X = noxiants (baddies)



**Fig. 8.**

Environ- ment	Elements to Know	Ideals	Forms of Learning	Forms of Planning
Random	system	1	conditioning	tactics
Clustered	system, action	2	meaningful	tactics/ strategies
Distrubed, Reactive	system, action, learning	3	problem solving	tactics/ operations/ strategies
Turbulent	system, action, learning, environment	4	puzzle solving	active adaptive planning

The four ideals in order are:

1. Homonomy – sense of belonging
2. Nurturance – caring for
3. Humanity – in broadest sense
4. Beauty – includes fitting together naturally

**Fig. 9. Strategic Planning for Types 3 and 4 Environments**

Type 3	Type 4
<b>Aim:</b> feasibility, extrinsic excellence	probability, extrinsic and intrinsic value
Expert fragmented knowledge (facts) not context	Context plus facts → understanding, purposefulness
Problem solving	Puzzle solving
Concentrates on means, ends are assumed	Concentrates on ends, choice of paths follows
'Rational' decision making two-dimensional, probable efficiency, relative value of outcome.	'Irrational' decision making three-dimensional, includes also probability of choice (intrinsic value of course of action)
<b>Product:</b> the plan	The planning community
Creates fear of change and resistance, self-defeating	Why resist your own desired change?
Narrow definition of cost-effective	Broad definition of cost-effective