Reading 3

Structures: flow, not boxes

P. McLagan and C. Nel

Notes

Many teachers will recognize that the way in which their school is organized sometimes impedes their ability to change the way they teach. South African schools tend to be hierarchical and authoritarian, with very little power given to ordinary teachers.

McLagan and Nel – two South African business consultants – suggest that this kind of organization has a long history. Hierarchies may have been appropriate in the stable societies of the past, but they have important weaknesses, in particular their lack of flexibility. This makes them an inappropriate basis for organizations in contemporary societies, which require quick decision-making and an ability to change rapidly.

The authors are addressing business managers, not teachers. While you read, try to apply their arguments to your experience of schools.

Reading

(…) *Structure* creates the *framework* for values and relationships. It functions much like the walls, doors, and windows of a house or like the channel that a meandering river follows across the countryside. It creates the pathways for the formal flow of information, and it guides peoples' assumptions about the actions that the institution considers legitimate. If any organization's structures support and require participation, then the organization has taken a giant step toward participation *as a way of life.*

(…) Old-style, authoritarian structures and work designs are particularly powerful barriers to the evolution and development of participative governance. Any organization that wants to move to participation must redesign itself in order to become participative and reap all the benefits

of a higher-involvement style of operation. Think about the profound and yet simple changes that must occur. They are so fundamental that even children see the discrepancies between authoritarian designs and what we need in order to have a more responsive workplace. This story illustrates that point.

One of our sons, Roark, and his friend Tanashi were playing in the study while Christo struggled to draw pictures of both the old and the emerging organization structures. The little boys became interested in the drawings and took one from the desk. It happened to be a drawing of a traditional, hierarchical organization chart: a pyramid of boxes connected by lines.

*   'That's one of those drawings of an organization,' said one.*

*   'There's a picture like that in the headmaster's office at school, with pic-tures of the teachers in all the little boxes,' observed the other.*
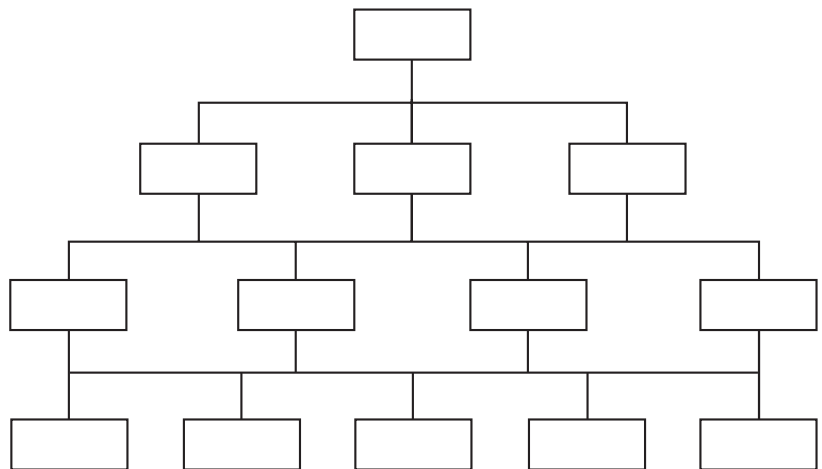

Figure 3.1 The traditional, hierarchical organization

*   Christo asked the boys what they thought of the drawings and how they felt about the organization that the drawings reflected. The boys' com-ments were perceptive.*

*   'It looks all sticky. If you take one piece, then lots of pieces fall with it.'*

*   'It's not nice at all. You cannot move it around. If you push it, it will fall over.'*

*   'The people here,' said Roark, pointing to the boxes at the lower levels, 'can never really talk to the people there.' He pointed to the boxes at the higher levels.*

*   'This one,' said Tanashi, touching the boxes at the very top of the chart, 'is always telling everybody else what to do. He must be pretty lonely.'*

*   'There are no paths for any of these to talk to one another. They are so separated,' remarked one of the boys, pointing to the boxes at the bottom of the pyramid.*

The children drew the same conclusions from the traditional organization chart as many redesign experts: authoritarian structures entrench superior-subordinate relationships among people. They create fiefdoms, territories, and chains of command that isolate people and that often make position more important that performance. The rigidity and dependence that they support make it difficult for an organization to respond to exceptions flexibly and quickly.

entrench: firmly establish
fiefdoms: here, this means small areas within organizations which the managers in charge 'rule' with absolute authority

Why hierarchical organizational structures were valuable in the past

The organization chart and its underlying values have been the standard blueprint for organizations throughout this century. It reflects the values of the authoritarian world as refined for use in the production sector by Frederick Taylor and Henry Ford. It assumes that organizations are more effective when:
- thinking is separated from doing;
- work is divided into small, specialized chunks;
- job and group boundaries are clear and relatively discrete.

It is clear that such an approach to work design and organizational structure had enormous benefits in the past. In boosting productivity, it helped to raise the standard of living for the middle class and create massive wealth for stockholders. Pyramid-style organizations have been the norm in public and private sectors for most of this century. (…) Until very recently, both the macro- and micro-systems have nurtured hierarchy, specialization, discrete jobs, and clear authority structures.

Changing societal needs, changing structures

Steep pyramidal structures create major problems for today's organizations. Information moves too slowly within them, customers are too far away from those who serve them, and people are too busy taking care of their bosses to care. Nor do they have the flexibility needed to compete in a rapidly changing global market.

In all fairness, the picture that we have just painted is probably not quite as bad in practice as we have made it out to be. Deep hierarchies and functional silos have been eroding for the last several decades. For one thing, when individuals move from one box on the chart to another, they often change the definition of the content of the job that it represents. Their skills, energy, and political ingenuity enable them to redesign the job – often extensively – while they are in it. The job's title may stay the same, and its position on the chart may not change, but the real content of the work may be quite different in practice from what it seems to be on paper.

Informal structures have also been growing in influence and importance. Communication, informal work teams, and social networks often

silos: here, this refers to the 'boxes' people end up in within hierarchical organizations, 'stuck' within their particular function or office and unable to see over the high, silo-like 'walls' surrounding them

form around emerging customer and institutional needs that the organization – as defined by the chart – is not meeting. For many people, work on task forces, project teams, and advisory groups takes up more of their time than work done through, and with, their boss and others with whom the organization chart connects them.

The old structures are rupturing despite the stability that the chart seems to imply. Yet people still spend a great deal of energy maintaining the facade, as if the direct reporting structure were all that existed. The boss above still controls important personnel decisions, such as those involving pay and promotion. The people in the organization – a precious and expensive resource – live split lives as the organization pretends to be more rational and in charge than it is.

Why we need flatter and more flexible structures

The old, authoritarian world view maintained that the whole equals the sum of its parts, and each part is a separate, discrete fragment of the whole. While we made progress under the directive styles of the past, we know that reality is hardly fragmented, mechanistic, or predictable. Rather, the new world view asserts that the whole is reflected by and contained within each of its parts, and each part is a microcosm of the whole. These world views are about as mutually exclusive as one can imagine. And the contrast has dramatic implications for the design of organizational structures.

The point is that there is an acute need to revisualize the organization. New pictures that show the desirable interplay among people will help to break the stranglehold of old mindsets. Of course, this new vision must reflect the configuration of work most effective in promoting productivity, and quality. (…)

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> *… the new world view asserts that the whole is reflected by and contained within each of its parts …*
> "

Authoritarianism	Some transition tensions	Participation
Managers think, employees do	Powerful forces for change • new information • environment • globalization • production technology • the new workforce • the customer as 'boss'	People in various roles think about the same things from different perspectives
People in senior positions manage		
People at the top matter most; many systems serve them and their information needs	Embedded and habitual practices and traditions	People everywhere are self-managing, with formal leaders using authority-based control as a last resort
	Resistance to change	Everyone's rights, accountability, and dignity are honoured and supported
Knowledge is an important asset for personal power and gain; teaching occurs from top to bottom	Business school reinforce-ment of authoritarian practices and values	Learning and sharing knowledge are key values; people teach each other in all directions
	Mistaken assumptions that changing one or two practices equals total governance change	
Formal leaders are superiors	Use of the language of participation to describe authoritarian practices	Formal leaders are stewards
Shareholders are primary or exclusive stakeholders	Time to develop participatio skills	Customers, share-holders, employees, and future generations are stakeholders
Etc.	Time to learn about what moves in participation	Etc.
	Etc.	

Figure 3.2 Transitional tensions

References

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