



# In Praise of Hierarchy

BY RICHARD MARTIN

There was an article a little while back in the Wall Street Journal, “So Busy at Work, No Time to Do the Job” (Rachel Feinstein, WSJ Online, 28 June 2016). The sub-title was even more instructive: “Amid push for teamwork and speed, managers suffer from ‘collaborative overload.’”

We live in an age of endless meetings, telepresence, and heightened expectations about availability and accessibility. That same article reports that one harried senior executive has over 100 “direct and indirect reports and several job titles, including general counsel.” Moreover, “Saturday meetings aren’t unusual, and employees sometimes line up seven deep outside his office for a moment of face time.”

“Face time.” To me, that term says it all. Everyone wants to have direct access to the boss, and the boss thinks he or she must be involved in every aspect of the business. Call it helicopter managing. It is supposed to improve communication and collaboration, and to break down silos. If anything, it does the opposite. There are so many demands on executives’ time and attention that they can’t possibly process all that information and knowledge efficiently and effectively. More insidious is the propensity to refer all important decisions to the head of the team or organization, which in turn slows decision-making and adaptation.

There is a solution, and it’s called hierarchy. It’s gotten a bad rap in recent years: We’re all supposed to be equal in our ability to contribute and compete; decisions should arise by consensus after being debated ad nauseam; and only the most entrepreneurial employees are rewarded.

Tony Hsieh, founder and CEO of online retailer Zappos advocates what he calls “holacracy,” a kind of flat organization with very little traditional structure and reporting relationships. But as an article in The Atlantic has noted, many employees of companies that have tried this approach feel disoriented and—strangely—demotivated (“Why Are So Many Zappos Employees Leaving?,” Bourree Lam, 15 January 2016).

I’m not advocating authoritarian rule, but I do believe there is a middle ground between, on the one hand, overloading any one person with all the important tasks and functions and, on the other, letting it all hang loose. Hierarchy works, especially when it’s not overly bureaucratized and stultifying to

“The value of hierarchy: balance

personal initiative and internal collaboration. Yes, these kinds of organizations do exist! The military is one, and there are also numerous companies and non-profits that manage to balance individual responsibility, authority, accountability, and competence to create dynamic structures that are adaptable yet capable of adhering to and executing on a single overarching vision.

And therein lies the value of hierarchy: balance. The reason hierarchy gets a bad rap is that people tend to confuse it with authoritarian leadership, centralization, micro-management, and bureaucracy. I don’t deny that any of these phenomena

can appear in a hierarchical organization. However, in my experience, they can also be endemic in so called flat organizations. When no one is in charge, everyone is in charge, and that leads to anarchy and personality driven decisions and relationships.

Here is the challenge: How to build a disciplined yet motivating organization that encourages personal and collective initiative with clear “arcs of fire” and “axes of advance”? In my book *Brilliant Manoeuvres*, I describe the military approach to hierarchical planning, management, and leadership. In military circles this philosophy is known as “mission command,” but I call it “nested hierarchical planning.” It’s nested because each part of the organization and its leadership must fit into an overarching structure; hierarchical because each part is governed and must contribute to the whole of which it is a constituent; and planning because goal directed behaviour must start with goals and plans that are communicated to subordinate and collaborating elements of the whole.

The real work comes in analyzing needs, structuring objectives, functions, and assignments, and adapting on a continuing basis, all the while avoiding bureaucratic and centralizing sclerosis. There are risks but there are outweighed by the payoff: a greater sense of belonging and initiative, increased collaboration toward strategic and common goals, and improved transparency and accountability. Hierarchy should be studied and applied properly rather than just trashed. Hierarchy is indeed praiseworthy.

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