Why Hierarchies Thrive?

Based on an article by Harold J. Leavitt, 
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Hierarchies

• No one has anything to say good about them.
• Many of us have our own horror stories about against hierarchies.
• Yet, the more we struggle against them, the more durable they are.
• Almost every large organization remains hierarchical.
• Even in the newer flatter, faster organizations, the basic blueprint of hierarchies remains intrinsic.
Why Do They Persist and Even Thrive?

The Dinosaur That Wouldn’t Die
Because

- Despite their reputations, they have been adaptable and capable of change.
- They deliver real and psychological value.
- They also fulfill our desire for order and security.
- They get things done.
Three Major Managerial Innovations

in the past 50 years
1. Human Relations Movement

- Began shortly after WW II.
- A new people-focused approach to management emphasizing participation.
- A philosophy of “the human use of human beings”.

- Paradoxically, in the initial stages, it help strengthen not weakened hierarchies.
- It was applied to managers rather than shop-floor workers and as a result widen the gap between the worker and the manager.
- Eventually, the participative idea was adopted in the U.S. based on the lessons learned from Japan, with innovations such as teams and quality circles.
2. Analytic Management

- “Management by numbers”.
- Traditional command and control, top down values.
- The rational school of management.
- The emphasis on reason.
- The unsmiling heroes best exemplified by Robert McNamara of Ford and the US Pentagon.

- Predictably, it reinforced the hierarchical nature of large organizations.
- HQ crunch numbers and develop plans for front-line staff/workers to implement.
- Coincided with the arrival of computer technology.
- Led to “paralysis by analysis.”
3. Communities of Practices

- “Hot Groups or Skunk Works” – dedicated, small, collaborating task-focused groups.
- Scorned bureaucratic hierarchies, avoid touchy-feeling “charm schools” and consider number crunching analysis as irrelevant.
- For them the **CHALLENGE** was paramount.

- Old hierarchies initially deride the undisciplined upstarts, but could not ignore their speed, innovation and task-orientation.
- Many organizations have develop their own small, self-isolating groups to put speed and innovation as a priorities in addition or even on top their traditional focus on orderliness and productivity.
Organizations

- Have adopted most of the features of the three management changes, with different mixes and combinations.
- Large organizations have set up little hot groups while expanding hot groups have become more hierarchical.
- The big ones want speed and agility while the little ones need stability and large-project capabilities.
Hierarchies are terribly flawed!
Hierarchies foster

- Authoritarianism
- Distrust
- Dishonesty
- Territoriality
- Toadying
- Fear

To work effectively in hierarchies we have to deal with these dangers.
But, Hierarchies

- Are not just an organizational construct.
- It is intrinsic to the natural world including biological organisms and mental processes.
- It is the nature’s way of helping us deal with complexity.
- Have powerful psychological motivations.
- Provides us with clear markers that allow us to know how far and fast we are climbing the ladder of success.
- Offer us report cards in the form of performance appraisals.
They

- Give us identity and a sense of self-worth.
- Help us define ourselves.
- Add structure and regularity to our lives.
- Very effective in giving psychic nourishment.
- Provides a sense of safety, which can be illusory.
Authority

• Hierarchy’s hand-maiden.
• Even the most modern managers exercise some degree of authority.

• Hierarchies’ authoritarianism shows up in a number of ways, most obviously in communication.

• Clings to the manager’s role as the skin to the body.
Successful Managers

• Are both engaging and authoritative.

• Ask themselves: “Am I, right now, in the presence of my superiors, my peers my subordinates? Have I calibrated my words, posture and tone of voice accordingly?”

• Possess hierarchy-attuned behaviour.
Hierarchies

• Remains the best available mechanisms for doing complex work.
• Here to stay.
• It is unrealistic to expect that we can do away with them.

• We need to accept the reality and try and reduce the bad byproducts.