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Published May 2005.

By Triarchy Press,
Greenways, Ryall, Bridport, Dorset, DT6 6EN, UK.

ISBN 0-9550081-0-7

Typeset in Times

Printed and bound in Great Britain.

By Creeds the Printers,
Broadoak, Bridport, Dorset, DT6 5NL, UK.

1 Introduction

1.1 The Hegemony of Hierarchy

Suppose that most of us, without knowing it, are addicted to hierarchy. Addiction to hierarchy might be like addiction to stress, which is stimulating and even exciting, but eventually drains our energy and spoils our lives. Or addiction to hierarchy might be like addiction to alcohol. Modest quantities, of good quality, are delightful, but excess is nasty. Drinkers who don't recognize when they are overdoing it get into serious trouble. For addicts, the first step in kicking the habit is to understand the addiction. If indeed we are unconscious hierarchy-addicts, then we ought to seek a deeper understanding of hierarchy's appeal.

How is it possible to be a hierarchy-addict without knowing it? It happens through the hegemony of hierarchy. The term 'hegemony' derives from the Greek word for ruler. However, its main use today follows that of Antonio Gramsci. He uses the term to describe an overall dominance that creates ways of seeing the world that are accepted as normal by nearly everyone. Hegemony exists when a situation is always taken for granted and is never questioned. I believe it is correct to say that nearly everyone finds hierarchy to be a normal and necessary part of organization. This automatic assumption that hierarchy is inevitable is a key part of its hegemony.

Talk about organization usually centres on who should be in charge. We're used to hierarchy and know how it works. It's a familiar and comfortable habit, the obvious fallback, the default option. When it works, it feels precise and clear – we know Bloggs is the boss, he tells us what to do. When it doesn't work, we blame Bloggs. We accept that hierarchy has its faults, but we think it's inevitable. We may try to ameliorate its bad effects, but we never question the basic idea.

There have been hierarchies throughout history and hierarchies exist today in every part of the world. Hierarchy really can be comfortable – it appeals to the 'child' in us and is easier than alternatives that demand an adult, independent stance. Senge and Wheatley describe hierarchy as a whipping boy; something to blame for an organization's ills while forgetting that we are the ones creating it, or at the very least tolerating it. Rosabeth Moss Kanter says that hierarchies depend on fear and comfort: fear of powerful

figures at the top and comfort with familiar patterns of relationships. These are factors that support the hegemony of hierarchy.

It is possible that hierarchy has genuine value in organizations, and perhaps in society in general. But we will only be able to make a balanced judgment about hierarchy's usefulness when its hegemony stops and it is seen as just one among several options. The aim of this short book is to look objectively at hierarchy. I want to show why it has such a grip on us. I want to discuss it as simply one possible way for getting things done in organizations. I want to inhibit thinking about hierarchy as inevitable or as if it were sacred.

Actually, the word 'hierarchy' started out with a sacred meaning. A hierarch was originally a chief priest, and hierarchy was originally the power-structure of the angels – seraphim, dominations, archangels, and the like. So the concept may still carry an aura of the sacred, even though today the term 'hierarchy' generally means 'single rule'. Thomas Hobbes argued that without a single sovereign to keep order, chaos would ensue, bringing a war of all against all. He was writing when the divine right of kings was strongly asserted and when the role of priests was to mediate between the sacred and common humanity. Hobbes was inspired in part by a fear of civil strife. But he also wrote to please the powerful, to reinforce the idea that power should be concentrated, not dispersed.

Today it is widely accepted that organizations have to keep on learning if they are to survive. If hierarchy, such an important aspect of organization, goes unquestioned, this surely inhibits learning, since to learn requires us to ask questions and to be open to new things. On the whole, organizations have a pretty poor reputation. We make huge efforts to improve our organizations, but they so easily slip back into to dysfunction. Perhaps the hegemony of hierarchy is to blame for this.

Because its hegemony leads us to think that hierarchy is the natural way to organize, we often feel the only alternative is disorganization. If this were so, then hierarchy would indeed be inevitable. But, in fact, there are two excellent alternatives – ones that don't lead to chaos. These two are called heterarchy and responsible autonomy. These names will be strange to most people. The strangeness isn't surprising. Because of our addiction to hierarchy we don't, and indeed can't, give serious thought to its alternatives. Whether hierarchy is desirable, or not, in a particular situation, we don't

know, because it never gets tested against anything other than anarchy or chaos.

A cynic might say that, if everyone agrees about the inevitability of hierarchy, it will be impossible to change. Certainly it won't be easy. However, two hundred years ago aristocratic domination was considered inevitable. One hundred years ago so was patriarchal rule. Change away from these was strongly resisted, but it happened. It could be that hierarchy in organizations is a further idea whose end is nigh, driven by social, intellectual and technological change.

1.2 Why I Wrote this Book

In my youth I thought, just like everyone else, that hierarchy was a natural and necessary part of organizations. It took years for me to begin to doubt that this was so, and more years before I started to explore the alternatives to hierarchy. But in the end I have become convinced that it is vital to question hierarchy's inevitability and to develop alternatives to it. Tinkering isn't enough; huge shifts are needed if our businesses are to become more profitable and creative, if our government agencies are to become more effective, and if our non-governmental organizations are to make real changes in the world and act in a really responsible way.

I have spent over fifty years in and around organizations – working in junior and senior positions in existing organizations, and playing a key role in founding several new ones. I have served on bodies such as university councils and national research councils, which has given me further understanding of the way organizations work. Although I am not an academic, and I was trained in the natural sciences, I have read widely in the fields of organization and innovation studies, and in the social sciences generally, and written a good many books and articles in these fields. The aim is to combine theory with experience to produce thoroughly practical insights and proposals about the future of organizations.

Hierarchy is found not only in organizations, but also in society in general and in non-organizational groupings, like the family. However, this book is primarily about organizations. This is for three reasons: Firstly, because organizations are my area of expertise. Secondly, because organizations are the place where hierarchy is most strongly hegemonic. In the twenty-first century democracy is accepted, sometimes hypocritically, sometimes

genuinely, as the best way to govern countries. In the family, patriarchal hierarchy is under siege. It is only in organizations that the rule of hierarchy remains virtually unchallenged. Thirdly, because organizations central to twenty-first century life. Human beings spend a great deal of their time in and around organizations – being educated in them, working for them, subject to control by them. Making organizations function better, and become better places to work in, would be a big contribution to human happiness.

My method in this book is to expound some general principles and to develop some general models useful in all organizations. I also tell stories about organizations, real and imagined, which illustrate and enliven these principles and models. Mostly, my arguments are based on organizational learning, on efficiency and effectiveness, on success in achieving organizational purposes, including increased profits for business. But I do not neglect the possibility that alternatives to hierarchy are morally desirable, that they could help people lead better lives.

James Ogilvy, who gave us the idea of organizational heterarchy, is outstanding in his ability to draw on the discipline of philosophy to provide practical advice for organizations. He has written:

You have a past; you have experiences and core competencies. Know them, use them and don't forget them. [But] don't be bound by your past. Feel free to reinvent yourself and your [organization] for an uncertain future.

This book is the starting point for a wider project. A Web-based journal will provide a place for debate and dialogue on hierarchy and on alternative ways for getting things done in organizations. In time this should lead to a further book, with more detailed treatment of certain topics. I hope the debate will appeal both to those who feel hierarchy is inevitable, but are willing to listen to a different view, and to those who already know that other approaches work, but need help in convincing their colleagues.

1.3 The Shape of the Book

In the section following this introduction, I describe **how hegemony works and how it translates into an addiction to hierarchy**. In Section 3 that I explain **what organizations really need** in order to function well. In Section 4, I describe the **three ways of providing for these needs and for getting**

things done in organizations. These three ways are hierarchy and its two alternatives of heterarchy and responsible autonomy. In the subsequent section I set out the **advantages for each of the three ways**.

In Section 6, I show that in real-life organizations we always find **blends of the three ways**. It is the proportion in the blend that differs from organization to organization. I explore **which blends suit which circumstances**. In Section 7 (entitled *Drivers of Change*) I describe the **personal skills and institutional arrangements** that support moves towards heterarchy and responsible autonomy in organizations.

In the final section (entitled *What is to be Done?*) I discuss why it is likely that **the time is now ripe** for a move away from our automatic assumption that hierarchy is the best way to get things done. Mainly through examples, I show how we can start **changing the blend** of the three ways, so as to gain the advantages of reduced hierarchy.

The *Notes* section at the end of the book refers to the sections in the book. The Notes provide additional material on certain topics and references to the *Bibliography*. By using the Notes and the Bibliography you can find full references to the works I've drawn on in writing the book.

I have not thought it necessary to provide an index for this short work. However, there is a comprehensive list of contents and the *Glossary* defines key terms and gives references to the sections in the text where the key terms are discussed.