

Jean Starry

## Against Hierarchy

Hierarchies are not a necessary evil. They are just an evil. And every time we assume they are necessary, we help to perpetuate the evil.

Everybody knows what is wrong with hierarchies. They go in for one-way communication, from the top down; and they put people into roles. That type of communication makes those at the receiving end feel frustrated and powerless; and all such roles have the ultimate effect of narrowing and dehumanizing people. We all know this from our own experience, and the management literature confirms it in a myriad research studies.

So why are there so many hierarchies about? Perhaps because they feel secure: you know where you are with a hierarchy, and "you're never alone with a hierarchy!" Perhaps because no one knows what alternatives there are, and what they feel like.

### **Hierarchy Simplified**

Recently I have been looking at the ways in which hierarchy has been modified or avoided in organizations. And the results have been very interesting. It turns out that there are a number of very important ways in which organizations around the world have been deconstructing and opening up their lines of communication and influence. (Richard Walton gives details of twelve studies in five countries in his article on *Innovation Restructuring of Work* in the book edited by Jerome Rosow, *The Worker and the Job* - Prentice-Hall 1974.)

The reason why it is happening now is simply because of the vastly increased rate of change we have been experiencing. In a static period where the economic framework can be relied on, hierarchies work quite impressively in spite of their faults. But in the present period of upheaval, organizations can't afford to build rigid shells for themselves; they have to be flexible and problem-solving.

And what has been found is that problem-solving organizations, if they work at all, work by spreading the problem-solving all through the organization, rather than concentrating it at the top.

### **The Natural Order**

When I say things like this to groups of real actual living breathing managers, usually one of them will come out with an impressive string of stuff about

the pecking order of chickens, the bullying order of monkeys, the power line in nursery schools, the status differentiation in gangs, and so on. "It's a law of nature," he says, "you can't go against nature."

I am not sure that nature is very relevant, but if it is, then let us look at another thing about nature, the way ecology works. There is an evolutionary system of checks and balances between the subsystems of the whole. Any attempt to "correct" the workings of such a system can only ruin it by spoiling the delicate set of self-adjustments which have taken, and are taking place. The ecological system is excellent for stability and the management of ongoing activities. Stafford Beer, speaking from a cybernetic standpoint, says that it "must take priority as the only means for obtaining coherence in a situation of such high variety that no other technique of control can be sustained for long." And he is specifically talking about industrial organizations.

It seems that nature can give us more than one message.

### **Human Needs**

Another objection which is often raised is that people need structure and external norms in order to function well. This is a much more sophisticated argument, which seems to be supported by a multitude of studies of conformity, and even Maslow (an enlightened psychologist if ever there was one) says that the basic needs for belongingness and for the esteem of others are very persistent and not to be denied. Are we not asking too much of people to ask them to make their own decisions and run their own lives?

It is really strange to me that people still raise these objections, when the evidence in front of their own eyes is so much stronger than anything they could read in a book. Over the past ten or fifteen years there has been the most amazing change in consciousness (in human nature) that there has ever been. People have become increasingly unafraid of the boss and his norms.

### **Breakdown Of Norms**

This reduction in fear (quite unpredictable from any well-known theory, by the way) shows itself in factories, offices, hospitals, schools and in the heart of the family itself. Everybody who tries to run an organization must by now have had many experiences of the old control patterns not working any more, because they are not respected either by those who operate them or by those on the receiving end. The norms do not give the same firm support that they once did. And the reason they don't is that people are actively questioning them. (I won't even start to bring in the whole thing about colonial rule and its breakdown.)

When people are so busy questioning and overthrowing the existing structures, it seems hard to maintain that they are really in desperate need of them. If they need them so much, how come they keep on smashing them, or ignoring them?

So that's another argument that doesn't hold much water.

### **Control Patterns**

At this point we may drive the manager back to his last line of defence. And he may say - "Well, I need structure, I need hierarchy, if I am to do my job." And when we probe this, it always seems to turn out that he has communication problems, interpersonal problems, with the people he has to work with. He doesn't want to take the trouble to know them or understand them - he wants the impersonal norms of a hierarchy to take care of all that. And if we probe a little further, we may well find that he actually dislikes all or most of the people he has to interact with. (Or perhaps he imagines that they all dislike him.) He finds it uncomfortable to meet them and talk to them, and he would like to reduce this contact to the minimum.

This is, of course, to aim at treating people as things to be used. And it often goes with an attitude of treating oneself, too, as a thing to be used - the term "self-driving" expresses this approach very well. The only trouble with an attempt to treat a person like a thing is that it doesn't work. It is self-defeating. Actually, even machines don't react very well to being treated like interchangeable things - they work much better if they are treated as individuals. And again, the more we dislike a machine, the more likely we are to treat it in self-defeating ways.

Seen in this light, hierarchy comes out as a short-term and inadequate solution to a much more important long-term problem - how am I going to lead my working life? Am I going to pretend that the people I work with aren't people at all, but more like abstract role occupants, or am I going to admit that they are people, and start trying to find some human way to relate to them?

### **Alternatives to Hierarchy**

It seems that the less confident we are in ourselves, the less we are in touch with ourselves and the world, the more we want to control. As Caroline Sherwood<sup>3</sup> has said:

*One of the most significant things about control is its link with dishonesty. When I am in control I have ceased to be open and accessible and am imposing a false rigidity on myself; or I am attempting to limit other people or situations in which I find myself. This dishonesty springs from self-distrust - a fear of my inadequacy to cope as I am.*

Now if all this is true, then the main thing standing in the way of finding better alternatives to hierarchy is not the Law of Nature, or even basic human needs, but our own fears about our own inadequacies. And this is something we can work on without delay, without needing other people to start first.

The implication of this whole argument is that if we want to operate non-

hierarchical organizations, we have to offer some kind of personal support so that people can work through these quite difficult feelings. Often it has been assumed that all that is needed is to change the structure, and that people will be released to be more effective. This is certainly what has happened in many cases, as a lot of the research in Norway and Holland (and other places)<sup>4</sup> has found. But it has often been found difficult (a) to maintain the success and (b) to extend it to other plants. One reason for this may well be that insufficient attention was given to the need to work through feeling about inadequacy and control - some kind of self-help support group might be all that is needed.

However, it seems true that in the present economic climate it is the flexible, adaptive, problem-solving type of organization, where the participants generally trust each other, that is going to survive. And this is not, repeat not, the most hierarchical kind of set-up. So it may be that we shall get more human, more open organizations simply as the survival of the fittest, rather than through some idealistic or humanitarian endeavour. That would indeed be irony for those who believe that any alternative to hierarchy is impracticable even though attractive.

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