

Separating leadership from the hierarchy

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One of the enduring relics in modern organisations is the hierarchical organisation structure. As a cultural artefact this structure is believed to be the right way to organise groups of people around a common goal. One of the positives though, of such structures is that they are very efficient engines to 'get things done', given the military-like chain of command. The ability of such structures to 'do the right thing' though is debatable. This is because such structures locate "leadership" at the apex of each unit of the hierarchy. In other words, the individual managing each unit of the hierarchy is vested with the mantle of leadership, often requiring skills that the person may not have to the fullest extent.

I argue that organisational leadership must be freed from the hierarchical legacy and that leaders must be located within the organisation, regardless of whether they are at the apex of hierarchical units or not. Such a model envisions a 'collective' of leaders who focus on getting the organisation to do the right thing, while the core hierarchical operational organisation gets things done. The collective leadership intervenes at each level of the hierarchy as well as at the broader organisational level to supply vision, strategy, and critical decision-making. The intervention of the leadership collective must run deep down to the lowest levels of the operational hierarchy, and act as a sounding board and decision-making engine.

Such a separation of the operational hierarchy from leadership, will, in turn, create highly focused groups of people playing to their strengths, and ensure that there is no dilution of strategy or execution at any level in the organization.

THE LEADERSHIP COLLECTIVE

Five broad competencies must be located within the leadership collective. These are — visioning, nurturing, moral clarity, analytical rigour, and integrative thinking.

Visioning represents the ability to visualise future idealised states for the organisation as it unfolds its purpose in its chosen context (be it the marketplace, or the broader society). Nurturing represents the ability to develop people to attain higher states of competence, and fulfil their potential within a framework provided by the organisation. Moral clarity represents the ability to evaluate choices, while applying the moral framework of organisational values and universal values. Analytical rigour represents the ability to delve deep into issues, and critically evaluate alternative courses of action and their impact on all stakeholders — share holders, employees, and society. Integrative thinking represents the ability to combine all of the above to inform critical decision making processes within the organisation, and solve crucial problems. It is quite clear that all five qualities are rarely found in 'leadership roles' within a traditional hierarchy since such hierarchies tend to blindly reward experience and narrow functional competence.

This collective must draw in people both from the operational collective (that is, some individuals would thus be part of both collectives), as well as other full time members. Such a collective must be able to effectively represent the entire organisation in all its diversity, and can draw in people from any level in the traditional hierarchy who possess the skills outlined above.

THE OPERATIONAL HIERARCHY

If the leadership collective may be compared to a coach or a strategist, the operational hierarchy is more like a team of athletes, with highly specialised functional, and management skills. In fact, this hierarchy functions just as usual, as far as 'getting things done' is concerned, but reports to the leadership collective when it comes to decision-making on 'doing the right things'. Thus, the operational hierarchy is tugged by two forces of authority — first, the upward force of the traditional hierarchy, and second, the lateral force of the leadership collective. One way to think about it is that the upward force represents the drive for efficiency, while the lateral force represents quality.

Some may argue that commonly found structures, like the Board, already address the roles performed by the leadership collective outlined above. This is only partly true. In the case of a board, its involvement is only restricted to higher level strategic issues, in addition to regulatory compliance, and it has limited influence upon more granular details of what goes on within all levels in the firm. Other such structures commonly found in organisations, are merely a fall out of the existing hierarchy, whereby the upper echelons of the hierarchy address the kinds of issues that the leadership collective does, but with little engagement with ground realities.

Running two parallel structures with partially overlapping areas of concerns may also create ambiguity

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in terms of occasionally conflicting pulls from the hierarchy and the leadership council. However, this ambiguity is a meaningful ambiguity because it creates a space for reasoned debate on important issues. The desire to standardise things, and reduce ambiguity is actually a weakness of the monolithic hierarchy, which such a dual structure aims to reduce.

Finally, to reiterate, the success of such a model will be dependent on the kind of individuals who form a part of the leadership collective. The collective must be truly representative of the entire organisational hierarchy and must draw people across experience levels who possess the required skills outlined earlier. The insights generated by such a representative group will be of a far higher order than what any hierarchy can generate given its bureaucratic limitations, and can make a big difference in directing an organisation as it unfolds its purpose.

(The writer is a corporate strategy professional.)

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