

The Concept Hierarchy in Organisational Theory and Practice

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Abstract: According to Paul H. Appleby, a respected classical American social scientist, hierarchy, which is one of the basic concepts and principles of organisation, is the means by which and through which resources are apportioned, personnel selected and assigned, operations activated, reviewed and modified. All these processes constitute the subject – matter of this article.

Keywords: hierarchy, basic concept, principles, organisations and resources

I. Introduction

The concept of hierarchy is a universal phenomenon of organization which means the scalar chain implying a ladder structured in a pyramidal fashion with successive several steps interlinked with each other, from top to bottom.

II. Purpose of the article

To analyze the basic concept and principle of hierarchy and demonstrate its universal application to organisation.

III. Hierarchy as a basic concept and principle of organization

Firstly, the following classical thinkers are associated with the concept of hierarchy;

- Max Weber
- J. D. Mooney
- L. Urwick
- Lydall Gulick
- Henri Fayol
- Reiley

Secondly, hierarchy was emphasized by all the classical thinkers like **Max Weber, Henri Fayol, Lydall Gulick, L. Urwick, J. D. Mooney** and **Reiley** as an important principle of public administration. **Henri Fayol** referred to it as the scalar chain, while **Mooney** and **Railey** called it the scalar process. Mooney stated that hierarchy is a universal phenomenon.

1.1 Meanings

The term **hierarchy** is derived from the **Greek term** for a ruling body of priests organized into ranks. The word **scalar** is derived from the **scale** which means **ladder with several steps**.

Literally, the term hierarchy means the control of the higher over the lower. In administrative phraseology, it means an organisation structured in a pyramidal fashion with successive steps interlinked with each other, from top to bottom.

J.D. Mooney has explained the scalar chain or scalar process in the following way: The scalar principle is the same form in **an organisation** that is sometimes called hierarchical. A scale means a series of steps, something graded. In an organisation it means the **grading of duties**, not according to the different functions, but according to the **degrees of authority** and **corresponding responsibility**. For our convenience we shall call this phenomenon of organisation the scalar chain.

While highlighting the universality of the scalar chain in the organisation, **Mooney** asserted that wherever we find **an organisation** even of two people, related as superior and sub-ordinate, we have the scalar principle. This chain constitutes the **universal process** of **coordination**, through which the supreme coordinating authority becomes effective throughout the entire structure. According to him, the scalar process has its own **principle, process** and **effect**. These are:

- leadership
- delegation, and
- functional definition.

The scalar system denotes that every employee is bound in a single chain of command. In the words of **Stephen P. Robbins**, the chain of command is an unbroken line of authority that extends from the top of the organisation to the lowest echelon and clarifies who reports to whom.

1.2 Definitions

Several definitions are given by several writers as:

L. D. White:	hierarchy consists of the universal application of the superior – subordinate relationship through a number of levels of responsibility reaching from the top to the bottom of the structure
Millet:	hierarchy is a method, whereby, the efforts of many different individuals are geared together
E. N. Gladden:	both in the simple unit organisation and in the complex large scale organisation the process of division of labour means that the principle of hierarchy operates; that is to say the individuals are arranged in grades, those above supervising those below.
Earl Lathan:	hierarchy is an ordered structure of inferior and superior beings in an ascending scale
Max Weber:	the organisation of offices follows the principle of hierarchy, that is, each lower office is under the control and supervision of a higher one.
Robert Presthus:	hierarchy is a system of ranking positions along a descending scale from the top to the bottom of an organisation.

But S.B.M. Marume [1983, 85 and 1988], an eminent Zimbabwean scholar in public administration, argues that the concept of hierarchy is a universal phenomenon of organization which means the scalar chain implying a ladder formally structured in a pyramidal manner with successive several steps interlinked with each other, from top to bottom, by means of which the following are successfully effected:

- Apportionment of resources,
- Selection and assignment of personnel, and
- Activation, reviewing and modification of operations.

1.3 Principles

These principles are followed to organise function units in a pyramidal form. They are:

- Principle of through proper channel**, that is, all commands and communications should pass through a proper channel. No intermediate level can be skipped in transacting business.
- Principle of correspondence**, that is, authority and responsibility should be coequal and coterminous at all levels,. It is believed that authority without responsibility is dangerous and responsibility without authority is meaningless
- Principle of unity of command**, that is, a subordinate should receive orders from one superior only.

The following diagram illustrates the principle of hierarchy in administration.

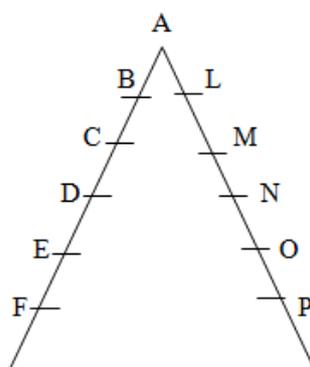


Fig. 1.1 Principles of hierarchy

In the above diagram, A is the head of the organisation. The immediate subordinate of a is B and the immediate subordinate of B is C. But C is also subordinate to A through B. This is true of all other levels in the, that D, E, F, and G. Hence. Orders flow top to bottom, that is, from A to B, B to C, and so on, and communications flow from bottom to top, that is, from G to F, F to E, and so on. The same is true on the other side that is A to q. The communication between G and Q takes place through A, that is, it ascends to A from G and descends from A to Q in a step manner. This is called communication through proper channel. The line of authority (the chain of command or line of command) linking the entire organisation is represented in the above diagram.

1.4 Advantages

The advantages of the **principle of hierarchy** are stated as follows:

1. It serves as an instrument of integration and coherence in the organisation.
2. It acts as a channel of communication
3. It enables to fix responsibility at each level
4. It avoids short circuiting by ensuring strict adherence to procedure
5. It prevents congestion of work at the top level
6. It facilitates decentralization of decision – making
7. It facilitates delegation of authority
8. It simplifies procedure for file movement
9. It helps in coordination by securing unity of purpose
10. It promotes discipline and order in the organisation

According to **Paul H. Appleby**, **hierarchy** is the means by which **resources** are **apportioned**, **personnel selected** and **assigned**, **operations activated**, **reviewed** and **modified**.

1.5 Disadvantages

The disadvantages of principle of hierarchy are

1. It causes inordinate delay in the disposal of work due to red tapism
2. It discourages the initiative and drive of the lower level personnel resulting in indecisiveness and inefficiency it is not conducive for the growth of dynamic human relations among members of the organisations, as it brings too much rigidity in administration
3. It makes the organisation tall (overextended). Consequently, the personnel at the top lose touch with the personnel at lower levels.
4. It created superior – subordinate relationship due to differences at various levels in the following respects
 - distribution of authority and privileges
 - nature of responsibilities
 - pay scales
 - qualifications and qualities of the staff

Fayols' Gangplank

To speed up the flow of business and avoid delay in disposal of cases, *Henry Fayol* suggested an alternative route called gangplank. He illustrated it in the following way

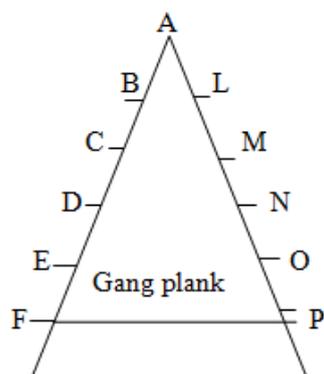


Fig 1.2 Fayol's Scalar Chain

Following the line of authority (scalar chain), F to communicate with P, has to go through E – D – C – B - A – L – M – N – O and back again. On the other hand, it is much simpler and quicker to go directly from F to P by making use of FP as a grand-plank, if the procedure is agreeable to higher officials, that is, E and O. Thus, the concept of gangplank stands for establishing a communication channel with an employee of the same level, that is, a horizontal communication system. H. Fayol asserts, it is an error to depart needlessly from the line of authority, but it is an even greater one to keep to it when detriment to the business ensues. Similarly, **Lyndall Urwick** observes, every organisation must have its scalar chain just as every house must have its drain but it is unnecessary to use this channel frequently as the sole means of communication as it is unnecessary to pass one's time in the drain. Due to inherent defects in the **hierarchical organization**, the **modern administrative thinkers** like *Chris Argyris* have suggested the matrix organisation (also known as fan – like organisation). This

form of organisation is free from the rigid superior – subordinate relationships. Finally, it should be noted here that **J. M. Pfiffner and Robert Presthus** have studied the impact of computers (information technology) on the hierarchical pyramid of an organisations.

IV. Conclusion

Let us conclude this article by referring **Lyndall Urwick** who observes that: every organisation must have house must have its drain but it is unnecessary to use this channel frequently as the sale means of communication as it is unnecessary to pass one's time in the drain.

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Profiles of contributors and photographs

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