

## An Organizational View from the Bottom Up

*New World Dictionary* defines "manage" as "to train (a horse) to go through its paces, to manipulate, control the behavior and or movement of." "Support" is defined as "to bear the weight of, keep from falling, slipping, sinking; hold up," and "boss" is "one who exercises control or authority, an official with dictatorial authority over an organization."

Manage, support, boss. These are the words we commonly use in our working lives. Their meanings, whether we are aware of them or not, affect us, too, and they seem quite descriptive of what needs to change in corporate America.

### Hierarchy and the Learning Organization

Much has been said recently about the "learning organization." Readers of Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline: The*

What is the value of a secretary? She or he (usually she) assumes many of the caretaking tasks in the workplace. In effect, secretaries clean up after their bosses: they follow them around and put their things away (we call that filing); smooth over the rough edges in their communication (we call that proof-reading or "straightening things out"), and act as intermediaries between their bosses and the rest of the world (knowing when a "good time" to talk is, how to approach them, or what not to say).

*Secretaries* hold what little power they have by virtue of the real or imagined secrets that they hold about their bosses. In fact, that is the definition of secretary, "one entrusted with secrets." So much for openness, honesty and trust. Managers and bosses, likewise, are trained to control, manipulate and get others to do their wishes. So much

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*Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* are struck by the common sense of many of his insights. Qualities such as openness, empowerment, creativity and honesty are the desired foundation for the learning organization.

But is our current hierarchical employment structure, with secretaries and "bosses," compatible with such a learning organization? I believe it is not. Yet little inquiry has been made about the nature of support work in organizations and the changes that need to occur; indeed, I have yet to hear the question raised as to whether such a structure can or should exist any longer.

for freedom, autonomy, respect and the notion of a team.

We accept that bosses require support. Does this imply that we believe they cannot stand alone? That left to their own devices they will slip, fall, sink, and therefore need to be held up? This runs counter to the discipline of personal mastery and the belief that we are whole people who stand on our own integrity. Yet, for some reason, this idea has not yet dispelled our expectations that the people in charge can't do without helpers. These are long-held, hidden-way-down-deep assumptions that need to be brought forth and examined.

### Hidden Assumptions

The support staff, by virtue of its existence, creates two tiers: the assisted and the assistant. No matter how convivial the relationship may be, the structure of the system often produces inequality and resentment over time.

I question the following beliefs about an organization's needs, and the assumptions that lie behind the boss/secretary relationship:

- 1) The "helped's" time is more valuable to the organization than the "helper's."
- 2) The "helped" needs the "helper."
- 3) The "helper," if capable of doing more, would be among those "helped."
- 4) What the "helped" require assistance in is only what they don't want to do—the mundane, tiresome, repetitive, tedious tasks that require little skill and less creativity. Support staff is needed, therefore, because without people specifically hired to do these unsavory tasks, the work would not get done. There is no value in someone who could be "doing more" for the organization to do support work.
- 5) Secretaries like their work and do not aspire to more. Some people just want to be secretaries. The trick is to find them, for they are a dying breed.

### Limiting Personal Growth

There is nothing inherently offensive about typing, filing, or answering someone's telephone. One can learn a great deal about an organization and what the business is about from this position. However, there are some dangers in the system. One is the tendency for people who are good at administrative tasks—those who pay close attention to detail and can be counted on to hold the pieces together (or at least

know where to find them)—to be discouraged from moving on. There is a lid placed above many of these positions, real or imagined, which is different from other entry-level positions in an organization. What starts out as an enthusiastic learning arena with new people, tasks and ideas, becomes stagnant when the challenge is only to do more of the same.

Equally limiting is our tendency to lump together repetitive and unimaginative tasks and call it support work, fashioning a job description that makes it one's duty to act first in the person of one's employer, and second as oneself. There is a danger in being encouraged to think the way your boss thinks, to know how he or she would handle a given situation, and to act in like manner. While some might call that "mentoring," it is not always a positive learning experience. Rather than seeing work as a place to become more oneself, to find ways to contribute one's gifts in the world, one can lose the fragile connection with one's own voice and mind. Secondly, and just as damaging, one may begin to disappear in the minds of co-workers, so that they only see "X's secretary."

These assumptions produce hidden losses for the organization as well. The talents of the "helper" which fall outside of job description are rarely tapped into or known. Similarly, those "helped" have few opportunities, if any, to experience firsthand the dust they stir up behind them on the road. As a result, some basic learning about completion is unavailable to them. Low morale persists due to an over-reliance on hierarchy, even if people are genuinely fond of each other. When the going gets tough, and people are under extra stress due to deadlines or other difficult circumstances, the tendency is to revert to what we know best—the hierarchical role structure. Also, the organization can create or produce only what the "helped" envision. The whole organization must, then, live with their blind spots.

#### Sharing More than the Vision

There is much more we need to learn about the effects of the employ-

ment structures we are living and working in. What difference do titles make? How constricting/liberating are the labels we use, for people and for the activities they engage in? What other ways, besides seniority and office space, salary scales and titles, can we deal creatively with the fear and insecurity that exist in us about our jobs?

We have much to gain from inquiring into our beliefs and assumptions about hierarchy: a better understanding of how this system affects us as people and affects the relationships between the different organizational tiers, and the power of the words we use to name different roles. The relationship between a boss and secretary connotes more than a work relationship; it implies ownership, as a parent was once thought to own a child, a husband was once thought to own a wife, a plantation owner was once thought to own a slave. These are age-old and dark beliefs that were commonplace just a generation ago. Vestiges of them still linger in our organizations. The belief,

the history, the unsurfaced assumption is present and it is ours to surface and to change.

"Secretaries" and "bosses" are the effects of a system of control and hierarchy that hampers the growth of individuals and inhibits the ability of our organizations to thrive. It depends upon a belief that some people can be treated as adults, given responsibility and privileges, but others, the majority, must be "managed." For this to change, the roles people play must provide a real share in the range of experiences in an organization—the vision and the voice, the labor and the privilege, the failures and the triumphs. Such inclusion will benefit the entire system, which will gain access to a greater pool of human experience and talent. ↻

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