

Bob Behn's Public Management Report

An occasional (and maybe insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities in leadership, governance, management, and performance in public agencies.

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On why public executives should

Beware the Dysfunctional Org Chart

A friend once told me that he had, long ago, learned to never create an organization chart. Why? Because “it always makes someone cry.”

But why would someone cry? Because the organization chart has wounded this someone's ego. The formal chart has disabused this someone of his or her status within the organization. This crier—or probably these criers—thought that they were very central, very important to the smooth and effective functioning of the organization. Then they saw how far down on the chart they had been positioned. It was a blow to their ego—and to their tear ducts.

So why do humans keep creating organization charts? What purpose do they serve? Does an org chart tell people what to do? Does it tell people with whom they should talk? Does an org chart motivate people? Does it provide them with specific performance guidelines? Does it tell them whom to go to for advice? For assistance? For direction? For cooperation? For resources? For guidance?

No. An org chart hardly provides these kinds of information. If someone in an organization was looking for advice or cooperation, one of the last places he or she would go for information about where to look would be the official org chart. After all, who might dispense the most helpful advice or provide the most valuable cooperation will depend upon the circumstances. Some people will be able to dispense helpful advice about some problems. Other people will be able to provide valuable cooperation for other tasks. And the org chart provides little guidance about who these people might be.

Still, if your agency lacks an attractive org chart with all of the boxes well arrayed, don't worry. Just go to the wonderful world-wide Web; you'll find all sorts of **templates** for creating your own, quite handsome org chart. Or, if you do not think you are up to this intellectually demanding task of organizational topography, any num-

ber of consultants will be happy to help you.

An org chart lays out the formal hierarchy of the organization. It is neat and clean. Every individual reports to only one other individual. This complies with the principle of “unity of command,” laid down in 1937 by Luther Gulick, the president of the Institute of Public Administration from 1923 to 1961. No individual should report to more than one boss. Otherwise, argued Gulick, the result would be “the certainty of confusion, inefficiency and irresponsibility.”

In fact, creating a traditional org chart enforces the unity of command. I doubt whether any of the computerized templates let you create a chart with anyone reporting to two bosses. (Alert-reader challenge: Can anyone find a template that permits this?)

The org chart is a fiction—an attractive but misleading fiction. It suggests that the organization functions through formal orders carried out by methodical functionaries while concealing the relationships that create the ability to produce real results.

Gulick stated the reasoning behind his principle: “A workman subject to orders from several superiors will be confused, inefficient, and irresponsible; a workman subject to orders from but one superior may be methodical, efficient, and responsible.”

Note the key operational concept: “orders.” The giving and following of orders is what necessitates the unity of command. Yet to produce results, most organizations require people to do much more than give and follow orders. (Anyone who thinks the military functions because sergeants salute and carry out orders from lieutenants ought to check out the meaning of the word “fragging.”)

Consider an organization in which people were only permitted to talk

with (let alone work with) people to whom they were directly connected on the org chart by a solid line—with only their boss and their subordinates. Every person in the hierarchy could only talk with the one individual who gave him or her orders plus with those people to whom he or she was entitled to give orders. How much would get accomplished? Answer: Almost nothing. So how does any organization function?

Organizations work not because of the solid vertical lines on the formal org chart. Organizations—even very formal, very hierarchical organizations—work because every individual within the organization knows, talks with, consults with, cooperates with, and does business with a large number of other people. These multiple, informal, yet absolutely critical connections never appear on the org chart. They can't. If each of these informal relationships was shown as a dotted line on the org chart, it would be an incomprehensible maze.

The org chart is a fiction. An attractive fiction. A comforting fiction. But a very misleading fiction. For the official, hierarchical org chart suggests that the organization functions through formal orders carried out by methodical functionaries while concealing—indeed, denying—the multiple, casual relationships that provide the organization with the ability to produce real results.

Hierarchical organizations work—and have worked for eons—only when they contain a very large number of informal networks.

Besides, these informal, never-written-down-on-paper networks never make people cry. **B**

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