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*Is Hierarchy Unnecessary? If so, what are the alternatives?*

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### Plenary

Group 1: These are the ideas we had. First that it's not necessarily the case that a hierarchy emerges from the gene pool. If we look at ecosystems they are in reality much more like heterarchies or even autonomous agent-based systems. If we take the example of Napoleon then in a sense that worked because people were focussed on a common purpose that they bought into, not because a great man told them to do it. From that point of view the structure was emergent from the circumstance rather than imposed from on high. That led to a discussion of the mixed economy where you have top-down constraints and structure but it only really works where you have emergent bottom-up processes like markets driving the process and there is a synergistic interaction between the two. One other thing we talked about was risk attitude. For example, if a risk organisation is in crisis then the risks you take are much more because the stakes are higher, so you tend to forget about the petty constraints which people agonise over from day to day in order to see that the other risks are better managed. On the question of alignment of roles in an organisation, people buy into them and go along with the risks that are taken.

Group 2: It was interesting that the people on this table have a similar interest in terms of the subject and its relevance to our work which was about organisational and leadership development. We focussed on the different sorts of things that leaders need to be aware of in thinking about the appropriateness of heterarchy and autonomy as legitimate systems inside the organisation and that one of the types wouldn't be enough and that a blend is necessary. That would have an effect on the way that they would lead the organisation and the processes that the organisation would need to go through to get to where they wanted to go.

Group 3: We spent some time discussing the concepts of hierarchy and autonomy and the extent to which they were applied independently of each other. One question which came out was whether heterarchy was a hybrid of the hierarchy and autonomy concepts rather than something distinct in its own right. So perhaps rather than increasing the typology we were looking to reduce it to autonomous agents as an emergent structure at one end of the theoretical spectrum and hierarchy at the other. Of course those two extremes are probably never seen explicitly in real life, but an imaginary individual could coordinate structures within some particular social system. That seemed to include the heterarchical example as a fusion of different requirements that are fundamentally strategic and the organisation itself would be a response to an environment. I think that was the point at which we realised that we hadn't really started to crack the thing open in detail and had got sucked into some of the interesting byways of the question. We left the discussion with the question of whether the heterarchical concept really part of that spectrum.

Group 4: Speaker 1: I think I might have to have some help because my response to the question was 'no', but other people said yes and somehow I did all the talking. I think that the example given from SOL was that of a chief executive officer in crisis in terms of running his organisation. Instead of using his power to enforce a hierarchical organisation he changed his power to facilitate the development of others so that the power became distributed throughout the organisation because it was his desire that that should be the case. That seemed an interesting paradoxical thought. We also had lots of other examples which Nazreen mentioned.

Speaker 2 (Nazreen): I suppose some of the experiences that I have had including the TEC (Training and Enterprise Council) were that when a crisis point is reached, people need to think about whether or not the organisation can continue to sustain itself the way it is. The usual temptation is to ditch as many people as possible and save jobs, but what may emerge from that is a different way of organising which is forced on the organisation because there are no longer the resources to do what they used to do. One of the key things that really helped at the TEC and created the environment in which people were encouraged to become autonomous and accountable was to take out all the 'checkers'; people whose sole job was to monitor how other people did theirs. So I suggest that shift was from hierarchy to a mixture of autonomy and hierarchy and I think in other cases there was a similar kind of shift.

Speaker 1: As to the second question, we had a long discussion about what typology meant in general and in this particular case, and again, I think we were coming to the conclusion that typology is an ordering system. You can fit any organisation into that typology, but you can just as easily increase that typology to include other things as well. So in a sense the typology is a sense-making tool which you could use or not. My personal feeling is that there is a seminal difference between a heterarchy and autonomy with responsibility or accountability. I think that's a different structural development in that a loop is closed. It moves from a straight line hierarchical system to one with closures which infer feedback. That may infer a kind of control which perhaps doesn't exist in the other two.

Speaker 3: In the paradoxical example we spoke about the chief executive in crisis who re-perceived his role in terms of heterarchy which hugely released him but then found he started to lose credibility because he started to represent nothing at all. Thus the organisation experienced a bit of confusion. But the ongoing aspect of the program, which has been going for several years now, is that we're really attending to how people understand each others roles and how they perceive or see a typology if you like behind the actions. The more they can discern those typologies, the more they can act and take committed responsible action, because they can see what they're doing rather than swimming blindly. So I think the typology has opened up hugely in the four year project in which the organisation, on a day to day process, has gone to a very high level of performance. So there does seem to be a connection with adapting to the changing environment.

Speaker 2 (Nazreen): And that was also true of the TEC, in that they let go of the old form and became one of the top five most successful centres.

Speaker 3: Well they haven't let go of the old form but they are now fully cognisant of the likely parameters. The political leaders are still very hierarchical and the executive leaders are not.

Speaker 4: In a sense what we have discussed is the language of this, because 'heterarchical' or 'hierarchical' defines and explains the situation just as 'democratic' or 'anarchic' explains it.

Gerard: Well first of all I agree with the comment about leadership. I do agree that a wider understanding of what leadership involves and a wider understanding of what personality characteristics and past experiences contribute is extremely important. In my organisational experience it isn't, on the whole, a widely discussed subject and I'll come back to why that might be later on. If different types of leadership were better understood and diversity was seen as a good thing, then there would be a set of things to discuss and that would improve the operation of most organisations. So I think you're right in that unpacking the concept of leadership and making it more widely understood

I was sitting with your group when the question of common purpose was being discussed and that is an important aspect of what you mean by 'organisation'. If you're talking about getting things done collaboratively then something in common is needed, but it doesn't have to be commonality in everything. I mean the reason why people go to work differs quite widely, but provided there is enough commonality of purpose or of values or of vision, and an ability to communicate effectively then an understanding of what can be done to make an organisation survive and thrive may be possible. There may be different views and varied weightings on the different aspects of what contributes to survival, but that must be the primary aim unless people are simply engaged in subversion. I think in my talk I should have emphasised that more, if only to say that 'common purpose' is a slippery subject. My way of looking at it is as a Venn diagram with overlapping individual purposes where the common purpose is the bit in the middle that overlaps. That overlap might have a linguistic or motivational or visional base but we do need the differences. If we were just clones then it wouldn't work because then we wouldn't get enough creativity.

Questioner 4: You used the word 'purposes'. Why not 'behaviour'? Surely that's the interesting thing?

Gerard: I think that's a good point. Providing the behaviours are sufficiently compatible to get things done then that's enough, but I think the understanding of appropriate behaviour would almost always be in relation to some task which will be related to a purpose so 'behaviour' 'task' and 'purpose' are quite closely interconnected. So perhaps 'purpose' isn't the best word to use.

Eve: Also I think if you have too much commonality in behaviour you've lost the diversity of doing things in a different way. So I disagree that you want common behaviour. You need an overlap which reflects the values and ways of doing things but too much and you're losing that valuable diversity.

Questioner 5: I think you need common links rather than common purpose. People agreeing on doing something for whatever aims they've got and provided they are

willing to help each other by putting their abilities together, all you need is something like a common instrumentality.

Questioner 6: Surely if we use the word 'culture' here then 'being a member' and 'behaviours' and 'values' and all those terms we use can come into it. That implies there is diversity.

Gerard: You can use the word 'culture' here but if you're contrasting 'instrumentality' with 'common purpose', then 'instrumentality' might be based on very short term purpose. You know, it could be just buying a railway ticket.

Questioner5: Well I'm buying a railway ticket because I want to go there and you're selling me the ticket because you're going to make money. So we have different purposes, but money is the means or instrumentality.

Questioner 6: What would enable survival then?

Questioner 5: Your purpose, because if you're pursuing your own purpose you are pursuing your local interest which may be different from the other parties interest.

Questioner 6: But what if I as an individual achieve my purpose before the other individuals. Do I then break away? How does the thing survive?

Questioner 6 Well a market survives with people pursuing their own interests. It doesn't have any overall purpose.

Questioner 7: I think that happens all the time. I work for the organisation, but when I've got the experience or I've paid off the mortgage or whatever, I may choose to do something else but the organisation continues.

Gerard: If we consider reducing the typology to 'hierarchy and 'autonomy' I have also heard people argue that we should reduce it to hierarchy and dispersed activity and that the distinction between 'heterarchy' and 'autonomy' should be forgotten. I think there is a systemic difference and that 'autonomy' does imply a pulling back of a power relationship whereas heterarchy implies a dispersion of power relationship. I think that it is useful to have the three and that to reduce the three to two, say 'hierarchical' and 'non hierarchical' or hierarchical' and 'autonomous' makes for a less rich set of concepts. That brings me to the question of whether typology in general is helpful and to your point about it being a sense-making tool. If a good set of concepts is developed then the sharing of them is fundamental to cooperation. This is especially true in a situation where people come together from different backgrounds. If you've been brought up in the same medieval village then you may not need such common concepts although perhaps even then the fact that religion was so strong meant that perhaps quite a lot of common concepts were needed. But certainly today it is important to have a set of common concepts. They have to be easily understood and that might be a criticism of my set in that they're not so easily understood and that's something I'm still wrestling with. For example the whole question of an 'ideal type' is not an easy term to use in daily life. People prefer more concrete examples.

Eve: Could I just make a comment? I think the idea of the 'ideal type' or even 'archetype' is also used in anthropology and I don't think there's any problem about having those as the extremes as long as there's a range of continuity between them. This is what gives variety and as we keep saying, in reality there are mixtures. No one real form is complete and pure and unadulterated.

Questioner 7: Just a word on that. You mean the terms 'hierarchy' and 'autonomy' in their everyday sense and I don't think they are difficult to grasp. The only one that's difficult to grasp is 'heterarchy' and there's some debate about whether it exists. It seems that what is distinct about it is this interlinking. It's that concept of no one always being top dog. That's the bit that's important and I'm not sure that there's an easy way of saying it in everyday language.

Gerard: Yes, 'rock, scissors and paper' is perhaps the easiest way to say it.

Questioner 7: Well I think for general argument it's always useful to have things to look at so that we can say 'how like that are we?' For example 'This is a pure hierarchy, how like that are we?' And you can see aspects of all the concepts in any organisation. The question is which at any particular time do we choose to privilege and if 'hierarchy' suggests a certain static nature and 'autonomy' suggests a certain disconnection between relationships then 'heterarchy' talks about a very dynamic situation in which there is setting up of leader and follower and we tend to forget that leadership is not a constant state. If we focus on the dynamic nature of peoples' positions in that organisation, we can ask how useful a concept is in an attempt to help the organisation.

Questioner 8: If I may say so that seems a kind of situational leadership model which looks at where people are and then what needs doing to them. If their problem is motivation then a boot can be applied in the right place. If it's lack of skill then a different kind of intervention is required. That's not quite the same thing but it's something about being specific to where you are. What kind of intervention is needed? I think it's quite difficult in looking at the map to know whether or not it's something happening immediately and I'm not sure that the thing scales smoothly between the macrocosm and the microcosm. Even in jobs that we might think very mundane I suspect there is a huge amount of autonomy in them because people are not told what to do all the time.

Questioner 5: A very quick comment on leadership. I've been attending a school for Linux users and one of the things that struck me the most when I started attending the meetings was that one of the participants said: 'We are a bunch of followers with no leader' which was striking because I didn't then know what they were following.

Questioner 9: I'm just wondering whether the word 'typology' in the context of complex adaptive system thinking is appropriate or whether it might be outmoded. It may be that the word is the obstacle and not the principles being discussed.

Gerard: Yes 'model' might be a better word.

Questioner 9: Well I was just thinking that we're trying to distinguish between the different types on the basis of power, but if we looked in terms of control we might

get a better grasp. In a hierarchy the idea is that there is external control in that one level controls the next, but if you look at a heterarchy the idea becomes that we have to control ourselves and get together and negotiate with each other.

Gerard: Somebody made a distinction between a facilitating/enabling hierarchy on one hand and controlling on the other.

Questioner ?: Yes, well we took the view that power is an issue and the differences we had were about control. I think the problem with hierarchies is that they really don't control and the reason is that control and communication and therefore structure, are inherently in thrall to each other and because there's no closure they cannot be controlled. So for me it's a question of thinking in terms of geometric structures which are inherently closed. Anything which learns as a loop cannot be controlled by a hierarchy. And that's why my answer to the first question was 'no'. I don't know what it's like to work in a hierarchical organisation because I wouldn't know what it was like even if I worked in one.

Gerard: I'll just make two points before I finish. Anarchy was mentioned and I agree that anarchy could easily be added to the list whether as a typology or model. But for the moment I would reject that because it isn't a way of getting things done in an organisation, though it may be that people could argue for it. And that comes back to the question of whether these definitions are right.

The other is about power and my experience is, and quite a lot has been written by Stuart Clegg that makes the point, that power has a tendency tends to cover itself up. Although people like to boast of their status they prefer not to boast of their power because it's thought that you lose power by revealing it. I think that's at least correct in some cases. That complicates the question of structure and control and conceals what is actually going on. So a lot of what I'm talking about is making explicit things that are actively concealed in many organisations.

Lastly I want to make a point about the idea of 'taking out the checkers'. You do need a lot of checking but it's a question of whether it can be self organised checking, or hierarchical checking. It is essential in organisations that have outside bodies that hold them to account. Banking is one. My old company, SHELL, have recently got into a mess over reserves statements and I understand that what happened was that SHELL thought it was better at measuring reserves than the SEC (Securities and Exchange Commission). In the long run that may be right but where they went wrong was that they didn't make that explicit. They should have said 'the official figures say this and calculated by them these are the results. We don't believe this is the best way of looking at it and for these other reasons we can give you a better picture. But they muddled it up. So the moral is you must have regulatory and generally accepted perceptions of things and somebody has to do that kind of checking. That may be done by professional accountancy firms or the partners or something like audit peer review of decisions.

Speaker 2: Yes, the idea of taking the checkers out is not simplistic because there are lots of other bodies to pay attention to, but I think that what is essential, especially in the example of the TEC, is to take out the people whose only job is to check everybody's work because the assumption is that we all operate from the worst possible behaviour as opposed to the best possible behaviour.

Gerard: Absolutely and of course a lot of that kind of thing was kept in organisations because it gave people power or a feeling of it and that satisfied various internal needs and not the needs of the organisation.

Eve: But wasn't it also lack of trust?

Gerard: Yes.

Questioner: I was thinking that what it's about is replacing fear with trust. And I think that the word 'fear' has been used a lot as being one of the background things about organisational life. And perhaps it's one of the things that cannot be discussed. And the same may go for 'power'.

Questioner (?): I think that's one of the things that I talked about as 'attitude to risk'. When a company is in crisis and the risk of going under is high, people are prepared to do radical things because the risks involved are less than the demise of the organisation. So if you're a manager you're balancing the risk of handing over control to a subordinate, trusting the person to get it right against possibly not achieving targets and being hammered by higher management. So it's a continual trade off of risks.

Gerard: You have been a very valuable audience to me. I have learned a lot and hope that will show when you read my book.

Eve: I think that you've helped us to clarify a notion of heterarchy and it is not the easiest thing to understand.