Essay 6: Ending Hierarchy

The purpose of a hierarchical organization with a commander-in-chief at the top and foot soldiers at the bottom is to eliminate discretion. When the commander orders that Company B will charge with fixed bayonets in a northwest direction, he does not expect that the foot soldiers will call a meeting to discuss options. Not only discretion is eliminated but thinking! Creativity among the foot soldiers is unwelcome. No, we don't want to hear your ideas about having our artillery pound their positions before you charge. Just charge, please!

One supposes that this model grew up in higher education when students were expected to learn their Latin and Greek and faculties were expected to teach that, as it had been taught for hundreds of years. What need was there for innovation?

Today, however, we need innovation. We look for ways of increasing retention. We worry that graduates are deemed unprepared for the modern economy. We wonder how we can educate students coming out of secondary education unable to read, write, or do simple arithmetic. We worry about competition from for-profit schools and corporate training programs. We wonder how we can turn out an educated electorate when the demand for a liberal arts education is tumbling.

We do not need a command-and-control hierarchy stifling innovation. We do not need to emphasize a structure that builds loyalty to a leader. We need a structure that fosters innovation, assessment, and responsibility.

I have proposed that we need structures built around systems[1], not around vice presidents. Vice presidents have interesting functions. I was one at five different institutions. We were responsible for making sure that the offices under us ran smoothly. If our college was part of a university system, we were responsible for protecting the college from the depredations of a prowling central office. If we were administrative vice presidents, we were also responsible for keeping the trustees or governing board out of academic areas. We could innovate within our offices but faced major obstacles if we tried to innovate across a system that involved areas under other vice presidents.

There were exceptions. Information technology pulled off some interesting coups when they sold the trustees on a new system. The new system required the cooperation of non-computing areas. For example, system implementation might require that course maps make enough sense to be programmable. Course maps were devised by academic departments and used by the registrar. Under the new

[1] Dickmeyer, Nathan. *Assessing Administrative Systems: Guiding Change in Colleges & Universities.* Chelmsford Press, 2019.

system, you could not require students, before taking 106, to have taken either 103, 104, or 105, or any combination of the three, except 104 and 105, unless they had taken 106 first. This, all too common, type of requirement was not programmable.

For the most part, however, innovation of a system like registration was done office by office, usually in ways that only built the walls around each office higher. The financial aid office might push the date when refund checks were available back before the add-drop deadline. The registrar might then move the add deadline earlier but not move the drop date. Students, burdened with a deluge of change information would not heed the add deadline, burdening the registrar with pleas for exceptions. Registration clerks would grow weary and blame academic advisors. Students would find little sympathy in either office. Vice presidents would mount offenses, determined to show that their counterparts were incompetent.

It doesn't have to be like this. What systems might a simple college have?

1. An instructional system,
2. A student data system,
3. A student support system,
4. An environmental scanning system, and
5. A strategic movement and resource allocation system.

This is a basic list. Note that none of these systems can be isolated in a single office. Each requires assessment. Each requires a team to guide it and innovate within it. Each system also articulates with other systems.

In *Assessing Administrative Systems,* I proposed that systems can be diagrammed using four basic functions:

1. Behaviors: the actions of people within the system,
2. Realizations: a point in the system where some actor gains a new understanding,
3. Information flows: the movement of data either between people, between systems, from people to systems, or from systems to people, and
4. Encounters: a point in the system where information flows between two or more people.

This style of diagramming moves away from the materials flow systems, like getting beer from the brewery to the retail outlet, of traditional systems analysis, and towards intellectual systems like the five listed above. What is important is

not what causes delay in getting beer to consumers but understanding systems and countering the flaws that naturally arise as their design evolves in the face of new challenges.

Let's look at environmental scanning. Once every five years or so, the college mounts a strategic planning effort. This includes an environmental scan. A committee of five faculty and three staff members is formed. They read several interesting future-oriented documents and write a sixty-eight-page report that lists their findings, including one on the probable growth of artificial intelligence. The report is attached to the full strategic plan and put online. One older, disgruntled faculty member reads it and writes a letter to the president about the lack of interest in the liberal arts. The president writes a polite response. Five years or so later, another strategic planning exercise is begun, timed to finish just before the next accreditation visit.

Environmental scanning done this way is viewed as an exercise in report writing, not as an ongoing system that interconnects with an ongoing strategic change and resource allocation system. Environmental scanning must be continuous. The people involved must be aware of the needs of the strategic change and resource allocation system, and they must be integrated into the college's environment. While faculty should be involved, the system should also be monitored by continuing education folks with their contact with employers, by alumni and their understanding of what their life now demands, by employers in the area, and by students who understand what young people expect from education. Environmental scanning is neither a committee, nor an office responsibility. It is a system, managed by a team with sub-teams having specific responsibilities.

The system works as follows. Individuals seek new information (flow). They fit pieces of information together into a coherent environmental picture (realization). They evaluate whether this picture might be useful in strategic thinking (behavior). If yes, then the item is considered by the full scanning team (encounter) before, if yes, being passed out of this system and sent to the strategic movement and resource allocation system team.

In my system book, I note five common flaws in system design.

1) Lack of integration. For example, no link between the strategic planning system and the resource allocation system.
2) Lack of a decision structure. For example, no person or team charged with managing and assessing the environmental scanning system.

3) Lack of adequate, appropriate, and unbiased information. For example, an instruction system with no assessment of learning.
4) Lack of feedback control. For example, a student support system that loops between reckless student freedom and strong in loco parentis.
5) Ineffective behavior. For example, a student support system where financial aid counselors are not asked to warn students adequately about the future burden of loans.

The systems book discusses each of these flaws in detail and provides case studies in which systems are diagrammed and flaws discovered.

Does systems management eliminate hierarchy? I don't think so. Vice presidents are still needed to fight off the system office and governing board menaces. Offices will still exist where similar functions are undertaken. Nevertheless, the responsibility for innovation placed largely on presidents and vice presidents must be moved toward the teams running the systems. There will necessarily be negotiations when a team wishes to make an operational change that affects an office. The office should be represented on the system team and the change accepted by the office or an alternative proposed that corrects the deficiency targeted without harming the workings of the office.

Nevertheless, in the next essay, I discuss the move toward melding several offices, enlarging the zone of discretion of office employees, and improving service to the college community. Even with the greater range of responsibilities, some hierarchy remains. Responsibility for the assessment of individual performance remains with the hierarchy. I believe that most attempts at matrix organization failed with the confusion employees faced with two bosses. The performance of individuals still must be judged, as in the previous essay. The operation of the system, including innovation, however, is a cross-divisional, team responsibility. Flaws detected are not human performance flaws, but flaws of system design.

Too often colleges have decided that a system is operating poorly and assigned correction to a limited-term task force. Few systems have single flaws, and few systems remain without flaws over any period. A task force that has successfully corrected flaws should remain together as a system-monitoring team.

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