Unit- I: Chapter 3 – B - Hierarchy

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Objectives

Objectives of this chapter are to make the students aware of:

- The meaning of Hierarchy;
- The importance of Hierarchy;
- The features of Hierarchy; and
- Advantages and Disadvantages of Hierarchy

Introduction

Classical thinkers considered hierarchy to be one of the most important principles of the organisation. There is grading or ranking of officials in an organisation as per their relative status or authority. It means the ranking of various people or positions as per their importance in an organisation. It is the chain of command from the top to the bottom of an organisation which leads to a super-subordinate relationship among all the people working in it.

Definitions

Hierarchy means the rule of the higher over the lower. In administration, it means the presence of several successive levels arranged one above the other. Social scientists have defined Hierarchy in several ways. Some definitions of hierarchy are as follows:

1. **Oxford English Dictionary:** Hierarchy is a body of persons or things ranked in grades, orders or classes, one above another.
2. **L.D. White:** Hierarchy consists of the universal application of the superior-subordinate relationship through several levels of responsibility reaching from the top to the bottom of the organisational structure.
3. **Henry Fayol:** Hierarchy is the series of officials that run as per rank from the supreme authority to the lowest rank. This is the channel through which communication is carried out within the organisation.
4. **Weber:** The organisation of offices follows the principle of hierarchy means that, each lower office is under the control and supervision of a higher one.

Hierarchy

The following figure gives an idea of a typical upper, middle and lower managerial hierarchy in an organization. Hierarchies have the shape of a 'Pyramid' as there are more employees at the base level i.e. are broader at the base, as one goes up the hierarchy the number of employees reduce, it tapers to a point at the top of the organization.
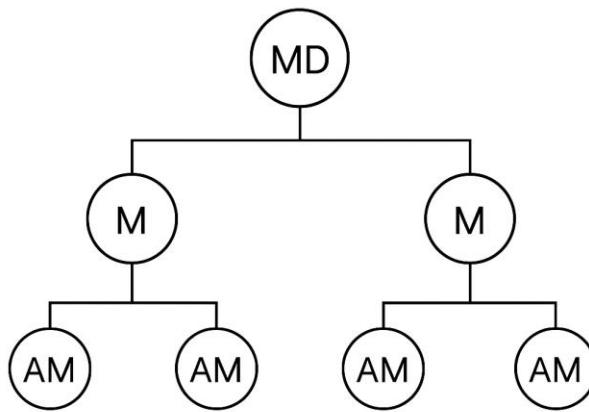
The chart below the figure shows the hierarchy of the Indian Military.

Hierarchy of the Indian Military
General
↓
Lieutenant General
↓
Major-General
↓
Brigadier
↓
Colonel
↓
Lieutenant Colonel
↓
Major
↓
Captain
↓
Lieutenant
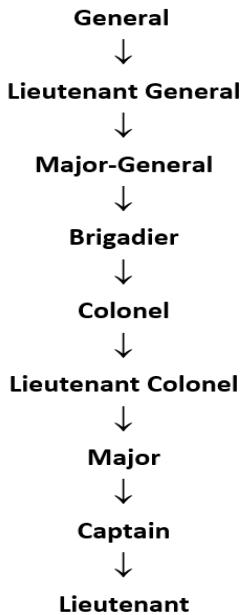
Types of Hierarchy

Normally, we see that some organisations have a large number of hierarchical levels while others have a smaller number of levels. The ones having a large number of hierarchical levels are known as a 'Tall Hierarchy', and those having a lesser number of levels are known as a 'Flat Hierarchy'. Tall hierarchies and Flat hierarchies are shown in the figures.

Tall Hierarchies

Tall hierarchies have more levels/layers of functionaries and thus have a long chain of command from the top to the bottom of the organisation. The functionaries of these levels have a narrow span of control, i.e. lesser number of subordinates at each level. The advantages of a tall hierarchy with a lower span of control are better supervision, clear demarcation of authority and responsibility, and more promotional avenues.

The disadvantages of a tall hierarchy include slow communication and delayed decision-making due to more levels in the organisation, such organisations are more expensive due to a larger number of levels, and a lack of motivation amongst the employees due to close supervision.
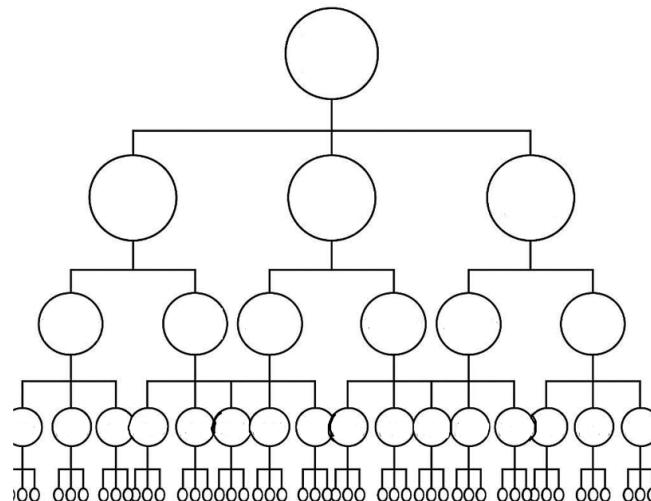
Tall Hierarchy

Flat Hierarchies

Flat hierarchies have fewer levels/layers of functionaries and thus have a short chain of command from the top to the bottom of the organisation as compared to tall hierarchies. The functionaries of these levels have a wide span of control, i.e. more/a larger number of subordinates at each level. The advantages of flat hierarchies having a lesser number of levels are effective communication, timely decision-making and more delegation of work.

The disadvantages of flat hierarchies include a higher workload due to a larger span of control, fewer venues of promotion and a lack of effective coordination.
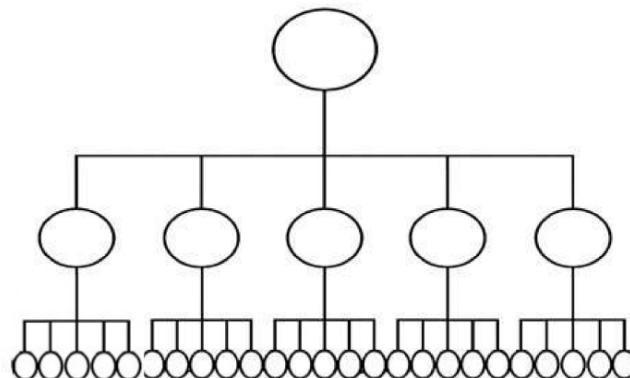
Flat Hierarchy

Characteristics/Features of Hierarchy

Hierarchy, a series of superior-subordinate positions, gives structure to an organisation. Following are the characteristics of Hierarchy:

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1. **Division of Work:** The work of the organisation is divided functionally into departments, divisions and sub-divisions as per the required specialisation. These divisions perform specific tasks given to them.

2. **Authority and Responsibility:** Every position in an organisation has authority according to the location of the position at particular level. Higher the level, more the authority and lower the level, less the authority. Proportionate responsibility for performing the given work rests with the functionary of the position.

3. **Formal Rules:** Hierarchy functions through formal rules, policies, procedures and standardized processes.

4. **Proper Channel:** All commands, directions and communication in an organization travel through the proper channel created by the scalar chain of command. Overlooking or ignoring of any intermediate level while performing an activity in a hierarchical organisation is not acceptable.

5. **Pyramidal Structure:** Hierarchical organizations have the structure of a 'pyramid' *i.e.* it is broad at the base and tapering towards the top. It means there are more employees at the lower-levels and the number of employees reduces as we go to the higher-levels.

6. **Unity of Command:** There is a unity of command in hierarchical organizations. A person receives orders only from one superior/boss due to which there is more clarity of objectives and less confusion and conflict.

7. **Scalar Chain of Command:** There is a scalar chain of command from the top to the bottom of the organizations. All functionaries are in a superior-subordinate relationship.

8. **Communication:** Communication in the form of orders/decisions and information travels through the channels of hierarchy. These channels are vertical – from the top to bottom and bottom to top; and horizontal – among functionaries at the same level.

9. **Career System:** Hierarchy having various levels of authority provides a progression from the lower levels to the higher levels.

Advantages: Hierarchy has the following advantages:

1. **Proper Division of Work:** Hierarchy assists proper division of work in an organisation. It also results in deciding various levels – managerial, supervisory – in an organisation.

2. **Proper Channels of Communication:** A hierarchical organisation has different levels of employees from top to bottom. The levels also act as vertical, horizontal and diagonal channels of communication in the organization through which the official communication flows.

3. **Checks Misuse/Abuse of Authority:** Hierarchy facilitates proper division of work at various levels, so a functionary in a hierarchal organization is aware of the limits of his authority and the subsequent responsibility. Due to the well-defined authority, there is less chance of abuse/misuse of authority.

4. **Performance Measurement:** Performance measurement of a functionary in a hierarchal organization is possible due to a proper division of work as well as attached authority and responsibility.

5. **Line of Command:** In a hierarchical setup, the line of command is clear. An official is clear about his superior as well as his subordinates. Clear lines of authority help in avoiding jurisdictional conflicts.

6. **Decentralised Decision-Making:** As authority rests with functionaries at different hierarchical level, decentralised decision-making is possible. Besides reducing the burden of the functionaries at the

higher levels, it also leads to timely decision-making. The quality of decisions is also good as they are taken as per the conditions in the field.

7. **Coordination:** Coordination helps in integrating various units/divisions of an organization into a cohesive whole that is able to achieve its objectives. It is easier to bring coordination in a hierarchical organisation due to the scalar chain of command that links different levels and their functionaries in a superior-subordinate relationship.

8. **Delegation of Authority:** Due to clear lines of authority and responsibilities in a hierarchal set up, the functionaries at different levels are able to delegate authority to an identifiable authority. It also promotes a sense of belongingness among the subordinates.

9. **Ensures Accountability**: Hierarchy not only gives authority to the functionaries at different levels but also helps in fixing their responsibilities. The functionaries are thus held accountable for actions.

10. **Uniformity:** Formal rules in a hierarchy help in maintaining uniformity and order in the organisation. Standardisation on the other hand ensures quality

Disadvantages: Despite having a number of advantages, hierarchy has the following disadvantages:

1. **Red-Tapism/Delays:** Hierarchies have different levels within a unit/department as well as the organisation. Multiple-levels in organisations and performance of work through the proper channel leads to delays in decision-making. Tall hierarchies have more levels and hence more red-tapism/delays.

2. **Rigidity:** Hierarchy brings in a lot of rigidity due to strict adherence to rules and regulations, authority and responsibility and procedure through the proper channel. Lack of flexibility makes a hierarchal organisation more authoritarian and hence less dynamic.

3. **Impersonal Relations:** Strict adherence to rules and regulations, procedure through the proper channel and superior-subordinate relationships amongst the employees leads to impersonal relations amongst the employees working in organisations.

4. **Abuse of Authority:** Functionaries placed at the senior/top level of the organisation having more authority may abuse or misuse authority for personal gains. Misuse/abuse of authority by the functionaries leads to corruption.

5. **Communication:** Hierarchical levels are also channels through which communication flows within the organisations in vertical and horizontal directions. In a rigid hierarchical set up most of the communication is downwards i.e. from the top to the bottom/superior to the subordinates rather than both ways. Lesser upward communication may also lead the top level functionaries not being aware of the position at the field level.

6. **Discourages Initiative:** Employees at various levels in the hierarchy generally have to follow the orders given by the superiors or functionaries at the top-levels. The employees tend to lose of initiative and do not come up with creative ideas.

7. **Compartmentalisation:** Every unit/sub-unit of the organisation starts working in a compartmentalised manner and treats its work as most important. It starts optimising its work at the cost of the other and the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation goes down.

8. **Lack of Participation:** Due to a rigid superior-subordinate relationship, downward communication and rigid procedures, there is a lack of participation of especially from the employees working at the

lower levels of the hierarchy, in the decision-making process. Lack of participation leads to the employees not having a sense of belongingness towards the organisation.

9. **Expensive:** Hierarchical organisations are expensive as they require additional staff at various levels to carry out the work of an organisation.

Cross Channelling/Gang Plank

In a hierarchical set up there is a scalar chain of command from the top to the bottom of the organisation. The information flows as per this chain of command, for example, if a person on position 'E' has to seek some information from a person on position 'X', then the route of the file is from C, B, A, V, W and then to X. The file travels to different levels in one department/part and then goes to the other department/part of the organisation. It leads to delays, leading to red-tapism and delayed decision-making. To avoid delays in decision-making, *Henri Fayol* suggests that there can be a cross-channel or a gangplank can be 'thrown open' in which a person on position 'E' can approach a person in position 'X' directly and get the work done. In this case, the superiors of both 'C' and 'W' must be aware that they are dealing directly to avoid confusion and conflict within the organisation. He was also of the view that the gangplank should be thrown open only selectively, as if all deals across the departments then the person at the topmost level will be ignorant of the goings-on in the organisation. Cross-channelling or gangplanking is also known as level jumping.

Scalar Chain of Command
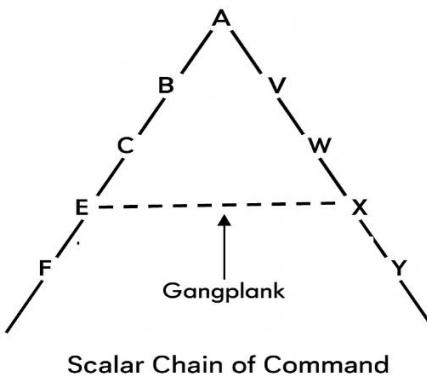
Conclusions

Hierarchy is one of the universally established principles of organisations. It is the scalar chain of command that links every person of the organisation into a superior-subordinate relationship. It works on the principle of unity of command and span of control. As the span is more at the lower levels of the hierarchy and decreases as one goes to the higher levels in an organisation. The decreasing span tapers to the top to a point and the resultant structure is that of a 'pyramid'. Hierarchy also provides vertical and horizontal channels of communication in the organisation.

Important Terms/Concepts/Information

1. **Flat Hierarchies:** Flat hierarchies have less levels/layers of functionaries and thus have a short chain of command from the top to the bottom of the organisation as compared to tall hierarchies. The functionaries of these levels have a wide span of control i.e. more/larger number of subordinates at each level.
2. **Tall Hierarchies:** Tall hierarchies have more levels/layers of functionaries and thus have a long chain of command from the top to the bottom of the organisation. The functionaries of these levels have a narrow span of control i.e. lesser number of subordinates at each level.

3. **Hierarchy:** According to Henry Fayol, Hierarchy is the series of officials that run as per rank from the supreme authority to the lowest rank. This is the channel through which communication is carried out within the organisation.

4. **Gang Plank:** Henri Fayol gave this concept to avoid delays due to the scalar chain of command, by allowing direct communication between two subordinates at the same level in case of emergency/urgency without following the formal lines of communication.

Short and Long Questions

Short Answer Type Questions

1. Give any three characteristics of Hierarchy.

1. Write a note on the purposes of Hierarchy.

2. Give three merits of Hierarchy.

3. Give three demerits of Hierarchy.

4. Explain Gangplank.

Long Question

1. Define Hierarchy. Give it purposes, merits and demerits.

Suggested Readings

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10. Relevant reading material from egyankosh - http://egyankosh.ac.in/
11. Relevant reading material from e PG Pathshala - https://epgp.inflibnet.ac.in/