

End of the Rigid Hierarchical Organisation

THE management and administrative structures that grew up in the 19th century and still function, for instance, in countries like Sri Lanka belong to the class of hierarchical pyramidal organisations. Scientific workers in Western countries have within the last 10 years or so reported on the collapse of these hierarchical organisations, as well as their inefficiencies and repressive nature. There is emerging now new classes of organisations which are more decentralised.

This has been largely motivated by the changes occurring in Western societies which has resulted in the growth of an aware and educated set of employees, as well as the emergence of a high degree of change in these societies resulting in the need for new organisation structures.

Among the well known writers on this genre of management are persons like Benis, Davis, Blauner, Emery, Trist, Harmann etc.

What they have been describing is that Western industrial society today possess a set of characteristics that tend or would tend to change the nature of organisations within it. These characteristics are a high rate of change, a high growth of knowledge and information, rise in the level of education in the general population, a gradual breakdown of class imposed views of the concept of the proper situation of one's life, and a resulting rise in the level of aspirations and expectations in the population. These developments are reflected in organisations, one of whose many transformations as the result of this is the break-down of the traditional pyramidal authority structure and the rise of multiple centres of authority in an organization.

In the structure of jobs and roles, the rising revolution of expectations has seen a demand for lowering of the degree of alienation and loss of autonomy in jobs. Alienation, especially with its aspect of too tight a unidirectional control of lower level participants is also spread unevenly

in industries. There is a trend technologically towards a less alienating technology as well as socially towards less alienating forms of job structure in conventional technologies. That is, there is a trend towards increasing the autonomy in jobs.

One of the workers in this field, Trist for instance, contrasts the situation during the time of the classical hierarchical structure and today in a set of dichotomies (for instance the educational level of workers is higher today than previously). Similarly cultural values and expectations for the work population in the Western countries have changed from achievement, self control and independence to self expression, interdependence and self actualisation. The organisations on the other hand have changed from mechanistic forms having competitive relations and separate objectives to organic forms having collaborative relations and linked objectives.

Other writers have emphasised that rapid change is the metaphysic of the present age and for the manager of today's Western organization it has become the *Zeitgeist*, the acceleration and growing complexity of change bearing heavily on organizational variables. Bennis has noted that the last 100 years has seen the speed of communication increase by a factor of 10, speed of travel by 10, speed of data handling by 10, and ability to control diseases by 10. The effect of these changes reach to the very core of human relations and have wrought profound changes.

The coming order according to these writers is characterised not by equilibrium but by emergent change. A persisting trend is towards the institutionalisation of this change as a process of research-development-innovation-dissemination and towards organizational forms promoting change. Significant shifts in the economic and value patterns of society are occurring at a very fast rate. In the past, there was probably for example, some conflict between

the older and younger generations, but in the past there was also a long time to socialise children into patterns that were relatively constant. Now the patterns themselves change rapidly and history becomes less of a guide in predicting the future.

Change as a way of life had been observed by de Tocqueville in America over a century ago, but the changing scale and acceleration of change is a recent phenomenon.

Apart from change there has been the growth of educated personnel in Western countries. For instance thirty years ago only one in eight of the American workforce had attended high school and less than 4% had attended college. Now four out of five are attending high school and about 35% of the population attended college.

These changes have resulted in a strong crisis in authority in Western hierarchical organisations. The rise of an educated workforce which overflows the slots of the conventionally stratified economy and society leads to an erosion of traditional bases of legitimacy of authority. The fact that there is also simultaneously a growth of awareness of their rights among the lower participants in society detracts from the claims to legitimacy of the power holders.

Harmann notes that American society has witnessed in recent decades the erosion of authority of "the parent, the teacher, the scholar, the law, the state". The issue is largely one of a balance between authority, based on power and authority and one based on a voluntarily given respect. A significant proportion of the American population including ethnic groups and the youth population deny that the established authority figures exist on a basis of trust and consensus.

These sweeping changes in the organisations in the Western world in the last 10 years has resulted in a wide rethinking on the organisation authority and job structures of most Western organisations. Consequently new experiments and new forms of organisations have appeared which emphasise decentralisation, participation and non-hierarchical systems. This column will in future issues, focus on some of these new organisation experiments.