Rethinking Authority and Hierarchy in a Learning Society

William J. Benet
Rochester Institute of Technology; OISE/UT

Introduction
The abuses perpetrated through authoritarian hierarchical structures have resulted in the oppression of people and workers in general (and sub-groupings based on class, race, and gender in particular) throughout history. However, I contend that this has been the direct result of the abuse of authority by those in power, and not the result of the use of authority and hierarchy per se. Thus, in this paper I explore the positive uses of authority and hierarchy within organizations and I contend that both have legitimate roles to play in creating learning organizations characterized by workplace democracy that seeks empowerment rather than oppression.

The History of Authority and Hierarchy
The concepts of authority and hierarchy have an historical context and usage that long pre-dates the emergence of modern management theory. George (1972), traces many of the concepts of authority and hierarchy in a time line that stretches back to 4000 B.C. In fact, Somit and Peterson (1997) provide a strong case that we are evolutionarily predisposed to maintaining hierarchical structures (and unfortunately, using authority in a domineering way).

Since the emergence of classical theories of management at about the beginning of the 1900's, authority and hierarchy have played central themes in the descriptions of how organizations should be run. Scientific management, bureaucracy, and administrative theory “all emphasize specialization and organizational structure based on hierarchical and functional criteria” (Hicks and Gullet, 1975, p. 176).

Many report that hierarchical structures are found so universally because they are seen as necessary for providing order, structure, and effectiveness in the workplace (Filey, House, and Kerr, 1976; Leviatan, 1982). Leviatan, who has extensively researched Israel’s Kibbutz industries, notes that the Kibbutz are characterized by hierarchical structures despite the fact that:

The Kibbutz society is probably one of the most egalitarian among the societies of the industrial world. Its adoption of the Marxist definition of the ultimate equality among members, ‘to each according to his (or her) needs: from each according to his (or her) abilities’ is not only a statement in the Kibbutz formal resolutions but also a widely approved principle among Kibbutz members ... although, one must add, with an important refinement to the original statement, ‘given the Kibbutz resources’. (p. 143)

Thus, it appears that authority and hierarchy are found in virtually every form of human organization, both oppressive and egalitarian. Yet, even for some advocates of scientific management, authority and hierarchy are not seen as incompatible with the humane treatment of workers. For instance, we are told that Henry Gantt, despite being a disciple and contemporary
of Frederick Taylor (considered the father of scientific management and its dehumanizing approach to workers) “demonstrated an almost passionate concern for the worker as an individual, and pleaded for a humanitarian approach” (George, 1972, p. 143).

Even before the emergence of classical management theory, the use of authority to attempt to provide humane treatment of workers can be seen at the beginning of the industrial revolution. Descriptions of the Soho Foundry of Boulton, Watt and Company (George, 1972) and Robert Owen’s New Lanark (Quarter, 2000) clearly indicate the very early attempts at using hierarchy and authority in ways that would benefit the employees of the firms. It is the failure to achieve the benevolent intentions of these early practitioners that has contributed to the backlash against authority and hierarchy. As Laiken (2001) rightly asserts:

Relentless adherence to the concepts of scientific management ... bureaucracy ... and administrative theory ... have left a legacy of organizational forms that are tenaciously hierarchical and inflexible, unresponsive to turbulent environments and notoriously inhospitable to human creativity and learning. Gareth Morgan, in his 1986 treatise, *Images of Organization*, refers to organizations as “psychic prisons” and “instruments of domination”-and indeed, that names the experience of a majority of workers in modern workplaces across sectors throughout the world. (p. 288)

But Leviatan (1982, p. 141-142) points out that the use of hierarchy in ways which contribute to the inequitable treatment of all members of an organization is not only harmful to those who are treated poorly but “It also has dysfunctional properties for the organization as a whole, as strict hierarchical non-egalitarian group structures were found ... to perform less effectively than more egalitarian structures.”

Laiken (2001, p. 289) goes on to ask: “What is the answer for millions of workers who continue to live in quiet desperation within organizations that are often physically, psychologically, and emotionally inhumane?” The answer may lie in the reform and legitimate use of authority and hierarchy. The problem may not be authority and hierarchy per se, but rather the coercive use of power to wield authority and hierarchy in oppressive ways.

Hicks and Gullett (1975, p. 161) state that administrative management theorists “implicitly” believe that power is good. For them, “power remains a viable, effective basis of organizations.” But the question remains: authority, hierarchy, and power used to what end? George (1972, p. 127) reports on the early work of Oliver Sheldon and asserts that “Sheldon provided several contributions to the progress of management, the most important being his philosophy, with its emphasis on management’s social responsibility.” This emphasis on management’s social responsibility is echoed by Urwick and Breck (1956, p. 53), who refer to the pioneering work of Mary Parker Follett, and show that she believed that legitimate authority did not flow from status but rather that “authority, leadership, control, all rest ultimately on the facts of a situation” and for Ms. Follett, those facts should contribute to the benefit of society.

George (1972, p. 131) records that Follett asked “Is power power over or power with? Is authority a social status - or an integrating force?” George goes on to state that for Follett, “no community could long stand unless it was founded upon the consent of the governed”.

**Semantic Problems Regarding the Advocacy of Autonomy**

I believe that one of the greatest barriers to the attainment of truly humane and empowering organizations lies in the semantic problems that permeate much of the literature advocating such reform, particularly through the use of the term autonomy. The literature
advocating humane and empowering conditions often cites worker autonomy as an essential goal of empowering organizations, and just as often identifies organizational hierarchy as incompatible with the concept of humane and empowering organizations. For example, Burke (1997, p. 7), in presenting a “new agenda for organization development” states that “it is significant that people in organizations have autonomy and freedom to perform their work responsibilities as they see fit, yet execute these responsibilities within reasonable organizational constraints.”

While Burke rightly recognizes the inherent relationship between freedom and legitimate authority, he, like so many others, adds confusion to the discussion by presenting the terms autonomy and freedom as synonymous. While freedom certainly brings to mind the linked concept of legitimate authority, and is often discussed as coupled with responsibility, autonomy has no such connotation. O’Manique (2003, p. 11), in tracing the use of the term autonomy through such writers as Kant and Hobbes, states that “these are the pervasive human characteristics of the dominant Western paradigm...to define autonomy as freedom from constraints.” Autonomy, a more absolute form of freedom, implies that it is devoid of any sense of responsibility to higher authority, organizational hierarchy, the common good, or society as a whole.

Therefore, I contend that the flawed use of the concept of autonomy almost guarantees that efforts to develop high performance, humane, and empowering organizations will fail. Too many proponents of humane and empowering organizations fail to grasp the double “catch 22” within the flawed semantic argument for autonomy.

First, if autonomy is granted to every member of an organization, then those individuals whose beliefs are incompatible with treating workers in a humane way (such as those who believe in authoritarian approaches) will continue to engage in behavioral patterns which undermine the development of an empowering organization. For, if an organization is truly committed to autonomy for all its members, then authoritarian and anti-democratic behavioral patterns by an individual within the organization must be considered acceptable!

Second, if hierarchy is abandoned (in favor of autonomy) rather than reformed, we lose the ability to use the organizations accountability structures in ways that limit managerial behaviors that are inconsistent with humane and empowerment values.

Thus, it is not autonomy we should seek for all workers. Rather, our aim should be the delegation of authority to the people actually carrying out the work, while holding all members of the organization accountable for creating collaborative, humane, and empowering environments.

In reality, hierarchy in and of itself is not the problem. Instead, the problem is that all too often an organization’s hierarchy is characterized by a behavioral pattern (such as autocratic) that is incompatible with humane and empowering conditions.

Organizations that develop hierarchies characterized by empowerment based behavioral patterns (such as those consistent with the collaborative management approach of Blake and Mouton, 1987 or the Framework for Democratic Values of Butts (1980) would draw legitimate authority from ensuring the creation of truly collaborative, empowering environments.

In fact, Martin and Martin (1989, p. 78), in writing about authority and power for organizational development consultants, specifically contend that “the values of [Organizational Development] OD include open communication, trust, collaboration, empowerment, and responsiveness to human needs”. Yet, they draw on Beckhard, Schein, and Weisbord to demonstrate that the achievement of OD values will not succeed without the support of top
management. This idea, that the legitimate and benevolent use of hierarchy is essential to the achievement of OD values of empowerment, also is supported by Blake and Mouton (1987).

From this, the implication is clear that top management must use its legitimate authority and hierarchy in ways that create conditions of collaboration, empowerment, and responsiveness to human needs. Thus, organizations which maintain their hierarchical structure, but reform their managerial behavioral patterns in order to exercise authority in the collaborative manner required to attain the humane and empowerment based organizations called for by advocates of reform, may be more capable of eliminating the despotic use of authority than organizations with new and looser structures where the lines of accountability are less clear.

**Constructing a Framework for Workplace Democracy**

As the above discussion shows, one problem we face in implementing democratic workplaces is the lack of a coherent definition of what workplace democracy is. In commenting on why workplace democracy has not been more widely accepted, Deves and Spillane (1991, p. 294) affirm this argument when they state “A fundamental problem is the lack of consensus about the principles and organizational arrangements necessary to accommodate industrial democracy.”

This paper provides a first element of a larger work in which I intend to theorize a model of workplace democracy that can contribute to the development of such a consensus. The framework I am using for the construction of that model is based on the polarity management concepts developed by Barry Johnson (1996). Within my framework for workplace democracy I argue that legitimate authority is a matched pole with freedom. As discussed above, the danger is always that people may attempt to exercise freedom outside of those “reasonable organizational constraints” suggested by Burke (1997, p. 7). Even Paulo Freire (1970/1997) recognizes that:

> The fact that the leaders who organize the people do not have the right to arbitrarily impose their word does not mean that they must therefore take a liberalist position which would encourage license among the people, who are accustomed to oppression. The dialogical theory of action opposes both authoritarianism and license, and thereby affirms authority and freedom. (p. 159)

But this leaves us seeking a definition of freedom not offered by the advocates of autonomy. For such a definition I turn to Dr. R. Freeman Butts (1980) the former President of Teachers College, Columbia University, who provides a three part comprehensive definition of freedom as a central value of democracy:

> The right, opportunity, and ability of every human being to live his or her own life in dignity and security and to seek self-fulfillment or self-realization as a person or as a member of a chosen group without arbitrary constraint by others...to speak, read, inquire, think, believe, express, learn, and teach without arbitrary constraint or coercion by others, especially as a means for making deliberate choices among real alternatives on the basis of reason and valid and reliable knowledge...to take active part in shaping the institutions and laws under which he or she lives in common with others and to do this by making uncoerced choices and by participating through active consent in cooperation with one’s fellow citizens; and to do it in such way as to promote justice, freedom, and equality for others...(p. 135)

Yet, the idea that these freedoms should extend to the workplace is not new. An early overall framework for the freedoms and control that should be in the hands of workers was
provided by Oliver Sheldon as early as 1923. George (1972) summarizes this framework as:

First, all the workers should share in deciding the conditions of work; second, the worker should receive a standard of living in keeping with the civilized community; third, the worker should have adequate leisure time for self-development; fourth, the worker should be secure from involuntary unemployment; fifth, the worker should share in industrial prosperity according to his contribution; sixth, a strict spirit of equity should be found in all relations between labor and management. (p. 127)

**The Need for Countervailing Power to Institutionalize Legitimate Forms of Authority and Hierarchy**

However, even if we create organizations that use authority and hierarchy in legitimate ways to create humane and empowering workplaces, the job is not done. We must then seek, as a primary goal, the institutionalization of these legitimate forms of authority and hierarchy since “expected and desirable outcomes ... will be more significant if they are long lasting” (Walters, 1990, p. 217). But outside of worker cooperatives or other forms of worker controlled organizations, effective institutionalization of workplace democracy within general industry usually requires some countervailing force to the coercive use of power.

Some have argued that this countervailing force may require unions. For example, Ngai (1997, p. 133), points out that “Research also demonstrates that ... labor-management cooperation efforts are most enduring and effective when implemented in unionized settings.” Thus, for Ngai, it is only the presence of unions that can guarantee a basis for cooperation among equals. As Grattan (1997, p. 88) notes “Wishful views of cooperation disguise the fact that genuine cooperation usually requires relative equals; long-lasting accords cannot be based on the benevolence of a superior party.”

Even in those rare cases where workplace democracy has been initiated by management without the presence of unions to provide the countervailing power (e.g. The Group at Cox, as reported by Nightingale, 1982), management can always change its mind if it is unobstructed by a union contract. As Rinehart (1975, p. 152) states, “what management has given it can take away.”

**Conclusion**

Authority and hierarchy are essential elements of organizational life. The problems attributed to them appear to stem from the coercive use of power to exert authority and hierarchy in oppressive and illegitimate ways. Achieving democratic workplaces will require the transformation of the use of authority and hierarchy in ways that contribute to the attainment of humane and egalitarian conditions. Such transformation will require a) a greater consensus on the definition of workplace democracy, b) a better understanding of what it takes to create transformative learning experiences that enable people in power to become self convinced that a collaborative workplace is not only beneficial for workers but more productive for the organization, and c) the ability to ensure that democratic workplaces can be maintained through countervailing forces when this second condition is not met. That these requirements do not now exist must not deter us from seeking workplace democracy. As Leviatan (1982) states:

If one accepts the claim that the Kibbutz society is indeed an extreme case of an egalitarian society and at the same time also a part of the industrial world, one must conclude that a hierarchical structure is apparently needed for effective functioning of organizations. But, it also seems to be the case that there are ways to counteract the ill effects that may be associated with a hierarchical structure ... Students of organization should devote some effort in innovating and speculating about other such ways, so that
 experimentation would continue in this direction, rather than try to oppose the basic concept of hierarchy outright. (p. 157)

References