

# Deconstructing Hierarchies

On the Paradox of Contrived Leadership and Arbitrary Positions of Power

Colin Jenkins

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Bosses don't grow on trees. They don't magically appear at your job. They aren't born into their roles. They are created. They are manufactured to fulfill arbitrary positions of power within organizational hierarchies. They possess no natural or learned talents, and they are not tried and tested through any type of meritocratic system. Rather, they gravitate to these positions of authority by consciously exhibiting attributes that make them both controllable and controlling - being punctual, highly conformist, placing a premium on appearance, knowing how to talk sternly without saying much of anything, blessed with the ability to bullshit.

Hierarchies aren't natural phenomena within the human race. Outside of parenting, human beings aren't born with the inclination to be ruled, controlled, "managed," and "supervised" by other human beings. Hierarchies are artificial constructs designed to serve a purpose. They are a necessity within any society that boasts high degrees of wealth and power inequities. They are a necessity for maintaining these inequities and ensuring they are not challenged from below. They exert control, conformity, and stability within a broader society that is characterized by artificial scarcity, widespread insecurity, unfathomable concentrations of wealth and power, and extreme inequality. Without such control, these societies would unravel from within as human beings would naturally seek autonomy and more control over their lives and the lives of their loved ones - control that would amount to nothing more than the ability to fulfill basic needs.

Despite the artificial and arbitrary nature of both bosses and hierarchies, they persist. They dominate our days from the time we wake until the time we go to sleep. They control our lives, our livelihoods, and our ability to acquire food, clothing, shelter, and all that is necessary to merely survive. If we do not subject ourselves to them, we run the risk of starving, being homeless, and being unable to clothe or feed our children. Despite this, we seldom examine them, seldom question their existence or purpose, and seldom consider a life without them.

## Capitalism, Hierarchies, and "Management"

*"People stopped being people in 1913. That was the year Henry Ford put his cars on rollers and made his workers adopt the speed of the assembly line. At first, workers rebelled. They quit in droves, unable to accustom their bodies to the new pace of the age. Since then, however, the adaptation has been passed down: we've all inherited it to some degree, so that we plug right into joy-sticks and remotes, to repetitive motions of a hundred kinds."*

- Jeffrey Eugenides

While hierarchical human relations have existed in many forms throughout history, the dominant modern hierarchy stems largely from capitalist modes of production. Capitalism is a system that relies on private ownership of land and the means of production for the purpose of transforming capital and commodities into profit for the owners of said land. Under the predominant system of industrial capitalism, those with sufficient capital may purchase parcels of land, build means of production (i.e. factories) on that land, and employ masses of workers to create products which can be sold on the market for a profit. Owning this land, and accessing the capital required to transform it into a means to produce, is a privilege reserved for only a very few. When land is privately owned in this manner, it represents a social relationship between those privileged few (owners/capital) and the rest of us (workers/labor). It is not owned for personal

use, but rather for use as a location to extract labor value for production and profit. The owners of private property do not use it to satisfy any personal needs, and rarely even step foot on or in it. Understanding the difference between **personal property** and **private property** is crucial in this regard, as the term "private property" is often misused to falsely associate capitalism with freedom. In reality, when private property is used as a social relationship, as it is in a capitalist system, it becomes antithetical to any sense of freedom or liberty. A large degree of the profit that is created in this process is done through the exploitation of labor, whereas the owner will pay each worker a set wage in exchange for labor that ultimately creates commodities worth much more than this wage. And with the legislative destruction of the commons that took place during the transition from feudalism to capitalism, performing labor for an owner essentially became a coercive proposition, not a voluntary one. For under capitalism, those of us who must sell our labor to survive essentially have two options: (1) work for someone or (2) starve (this reality is the exact reason why the welfare state became a necessity alongside industrialization).

Because the development of capitalism represents the latest form of coercive social relations between human beings, the need for industrial "management" and "supervision" is paramount. After establishing the coercive conditions necessary to compel workers to sell their labor to owners (through the legislative destruction of the commons), owners were left with figuring out how to maximize their exploitation of a workforce that was ultimately forced to spend half its waking hours (if not more) in a place they do not want to be in, doing something they do not want to do. This task has endured ever since. Not surprisingly, scientific management, or Taylorism, developed alongside industrial capitalism with this very purpose: to improve "economic efficiency" through the improvement of "labor productivity." Fordism also surfaced around this time, taking a more all-encompassing approach to issues of mass productivity and management under capitalism. The common denominator in these fields of "human management" was to figure out how to effectively commodify a human being; in other words, how to turn a human being into a machine in order to perform menial, repetitive tasks for several hours at a time. Capitalist management systems looked to slave plantations for ideas on how to best accomplish this task. "The plantation didn't just produce the commodities that fueled the broader economy; it also generated innovative business practices that would come to typify modern management," Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman write. "As some of the most heavily capitalized enterprises in antebellum America, plantations offered early examples of time-motion studies and regimentation through clocks and bells. Seeking ever-greater efficiencies in cotton picking, slaveholders reorganized their fields, regimented the workday, and implemented a system of vertical reporting that made overseers into managers answerable to those above for the labor of those below."

The hierarchies of slave plantation management have effectively been transferred to modern office buildings in both the private and public sectors. To this day, entire fields of study have been dedicated to "organizational management" and "workforce optimization." The hierarchies that exist today, whether in private or public organizations, stem from archaic forms of management designed to essentially make humans less human. The fact that the term "human resources" has been fully integrated into our vernacular highlights the inhumane nature of labor in this regard. Coercion is simply not enough to ensure productivity. Frederick Taylor's contributions made this clear, at times valuing workers as less than "intelligent gorillas;" while Henry Ford's assembly-line, mass-production operations carried out Marx's warning from decades prior, essentially turning workers into mere "appendages of machines." Ford even went as far as creating a Sociological Department designed to study and standardize workers' private lives in order to fur-

ther streamline them into visages of machinery. Ultimately, these fields of study have developed the corporate culture that has become synonymous with capitalist society: extreme hierarchies, a total absence of autonomy, strict guidelines and rules, threats of disciplinary action, and complete submission to conformity. These organizational hierarchies have been placed everywhere - within most corporations, most companies, most schools, most non-profits, most NGOs, and most public agencies. Quite simply stated, they are a necessary component in maintaining the unnatural wealth and power inequities that are so rampant within the capitalist system. Without high levels of control to keep people in line, this system would inevitably collapse.

## The Contradictions and Inefficiencies within Hierarchies

*"Maybe it is not a coincidence that, even in heaven, under the perspective of the Bible, there is a hierarchy. After all, what better way to impose the "benefits" of accepting the power of a hierarchy in the human mind?"*

- Miguel Reynolds Brandao ("entrepreneur, business developer, and investor")

While hierarchies serve a systemic purpose in regards to how they relate to broader society, they also develop internal cultures that mimic the unequal power relations that have come to characterize our society under capitalism. These internal cultures breed competition among workers by creating an exclusive, managerial class that must be filled by a select few. In order to satisfy the inherent power inequities that exist within all hierarchies, organizations create arbitrary positions of authority, advertise these positions as being available to those who "qualify," and encourage people to pursue these positions in exchange for material gain. In this pursuit, however, contradictions and inefficiencies naturally arise.

In a professional capacity, whether we're talking about a public or private organization, people climb the proverbial ladder for two reasons: 1) to make more money and 2) to work less. The narrow-minded pursuit of authority and power, whether conscious or subconscious, essentially lies within these two, fundamental objectives that are inherent to human beings who are placed within hierarchical (competitive, not cooperative) systems defined by capitalist/corporate culture. In other words, when forced into a top-down organizational structure, it becomes natural to want to make more (money) and work less (idleness). The often-subconsciously attractive idea of acquiring a position of authority is the singular casing around these material wants. While the uncivilized act of exerting power over another human being may boost self-esteem, this form of psychosis ultimately operates secondary to the material benefits that come with this power. Therefore, it is safe to assume that if material benefits did not accompany positions of authority, they likely would not exist.

Regardless of this inclination, there are still many people who have no interest in climbing the ladder. Ironically, these people, for one reason or another, are more beholden to the natural human attribute of cooperation. They are either able to see beyond the self-centered pursuit of power (money and idleness) and are simply turned off by it, or they are just not interested in climbing over (and eventually overseeing) others for personal gain. In turn, those who choose to seek power (money and idleness) - those who are willing to spend time and energy climbing the ladder - do so in a purely self-serving way. They simply want to make more and work less, have no qualms about taking positions of artificial superiority over their fellow workers, and thus do

whatever it takes to obtain that status within the organization. This flow creates an interesting paradox, as the most self-serving members of an organization inevitably gravitate to the top of the hierarchy. Thus, while organizations theoretically consist of groups of people working toward a common goal, this natural phenomenon based in hierarchical ascendancy inevitably destroys any hopes of a collective will, while also breeding a culture of incompetence (as those self-serving individuals take the reins).

This culture of incompetence almost always comes to the forefront, as a majority of workers will inevitably experience it through daily occurrences of redundancy, inefficiency, and frustration. When there is work to be done, bosses almost inevitably seek refuge in their offices. When crises arrive, bosses do not take it upon themselves to work, but rather demand more work from those below. In most cases, bosses become so far removed from the actual work and mission of an organization that they essentially alienate themselves. As this disconnect grows, so too does the culture of incompetency. And with the tendency for animosity to develop from the majority of the workforce that is perceived to be "at the bottom," the only option for those who seek to control, supervise, and "manage" other human beings is to instill fear in their subjects. At this stage, trust is non-existent, organizational problems are always reduced to workers not doing enough, and solutions are always rooted in disciplinary action.

Furthermore, this phenomenon creates a natural inefficiency as those who are paid more money are essentially contributing less to the mission. In the case of so-called "supervisory" and "management" positions, this inefficiency becomes two-fold by not only creating a scenario where the organization is getting less for more, but also seeking more for less from the majority of its workforce (since this void must be filled somewhere). With this realization, we can see that hierarchies are not only unnatural forms of organization, but also inefficient and incompetent ones. Their purpose for existing lies in controlling this unnatural environment predicated upon massive inequities of power and wealth. However, beyond this need to reinforce the coercive nature of society, they are useless from within. This paradoxical existence is thus forced to construct mythological purposes for the arbitrary power positions that serve no real purpose internally, yet must maintain and mimic the power relations that exist externally. Ironically, wielding fear through micromanagement and the constant threat of disciplinary action ultimately becomes this artificial purpose. And it convinces those who occupy these power positions that workers are inherently lazy and, therefore, must be prodded like cattle. The irony comes in the fact that any development of so-called laziness, or a lack of effort, that comes to fruition from below almost always is the result of widespread animosity toward those who exist "higher up" on the ladder for the sole purpose of making more and doing less. Human beings simply do not respond to arbitrary positions of authority (often candy-coated as "leadership positions") because such positions serve no purpose in any real sense of organizational operations. Frankly put, the mere existence of these positions is an insult to all of those who perform the brunt of the work from "below."

## **Corporate Doublespeak, Contrived Leadership, and Insecurity**

*"Corporations are totalitarian institutions. Board of directors at the top of managers give orders, everyone follows orders. At the very bottom of command, if you are lucky*

*you can rent yourself to it and get a job, and if you are sufficiently propagandized you may even buy some of the junk they produce and so on."*

- Noam Chomsky

The totalitarianism inherent in corporate structures is defined and preserved by the hierarchy, and these structures stretch far beyond for-profit, private enterprises. In an attempt to justify arbitrary positions of power, organizations often portray them as "leadership" positions, deploying corporate doublespeak like "team leaders" or "officers" in their hierarchical arrangement. The problem with this is that leadership, in any true sense, is an absolute contradiction from power; and especially from arbitrary power. The acquisition of money and idleness that becomes synonymous with climbing the ladder makes leadership roles impossible for those who fill these positions to obtain. Never mind that the term "leadership" itself often includes connotations of superiority, or at the very least attempts to differentiate oneself from "the pack." Leadership can never be arbitrarily assigned through "promotions" or self-proclamation. If leaders truly exist among people, they only do so through a form of facilitating. And it may only develop organically, as the result of unplanned developments springing from natural occurrences of facilitation from within a group. Leaders are facilitators who may provide organic direction in a group, and they are always those who exhibit a selfless willingness to take on a brunt of the effort, or at the very least their share of the collective effort, while expecting nothing of individual value in return. Dictating from behind a desk is not leadership. Screaming down from a supervisory booth is not leadership. Analyzing and calibrating labor productivity is not leadership. Those who climb the proverbial ladder to (1) make more and (2) work less can never be leaders. Thus, filling arbitrary positions in hierarchies can never produce any semblance of leadership. Coercion, yes. Fear, yes. But never leadership.

The fact that hierarchies remain the predominant organizational structure throughout capitalist society tells us two things: (1) they are the most effective structure for exerting control; and (2) control is most desirable characteristic of any organization existing under capitalism. The inherent cultures of incompetence and contradictions which develop within these structures remain a secondary concern to that of maintaining control. And by masking this controlled environment through corporate doublespeak, organizations are often able to stoke a cognitive dissonance among its workforce that simultaneously puts forth a healthy dose of faith in the "team approach" by day while complaining about the incompetent and overbearing bosses by night. This is accomplished through a rebranding of arbitrary power to justify it with the appearance of a (non-existent) meritocracy, and tame it by transforming self-serving overseers into "leaders." The insidious nature of this rebranding even goes as far as trying to convince those in arbitrary positions of power that they not only belong there, but invariably serve an important purpose there. The natural insecurities that develop within managers and supervisors, who are plagued with a never-ending paranoia about being exposed as the frauds they are, are put at ease with cycles upon cycles of "leadership courses" and mounds of self-help books that call on their inner-CEOs to seize the moment!

Despite these contrived efforts to establish competence and confidence, those in arbitrary positions of power within a hierarchy are undoubtedly reminded of their uselessness during daily operations. The material benefits that come with these positions are typically all that's needed to cope with this realization; however, the organizational contradictions and inefficiencies always remain, and with them enduring fissures seeping with animosity and fearfulness from below,

and insecurity and paranoia from above. There is simply no getting past the fact that the mere act of "supervising" another person is inhumane, because its purpose is premised on the belief that people are inherently lazy, dishonest, irresponsible, and incompetent. Or, at the very least, the existence of supervision confirms the coercive and inhumane nature of both traditional labor and hierarchies. Supervision is only necessary in a world where workers are viewed as cattle to be prodded, pushed, "motivated," and directed. The fact that those placed with this task of supervision possess no special skills or talents only makes this relationship even more precarious, as those being supervised will almost always recognize the illegitimacy of their supposed superior. Whether through interviews or exams, there simply is no way to find people suitable for supervising others... because, quite frankly, they don't exist. The supervision or management of a human being is never a suitable proposition, no matter how many executives, boards, curriculum developers, trainers, and corporate planners try to make it so.



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