

Triangulation of Gravity

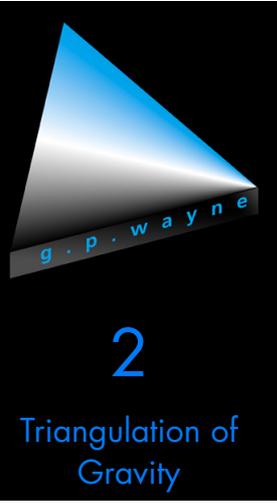
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Flat management is one of the exceptions that prove a rule; hierarchies dominate all forms of human organisation. I can't recall any organisation with which I've been associated that operated successfully under a flat management structure, one where there really was equal distribution of responsibility, as opposed to allocating that responsibility on a hierarchical scale based on age, experience, length of service or other criteria. Nearly all businesses work like this, as does the government, the civil service, nearly all religions, the military and virtually any other endeavour where a fair number of people attempt a joint venture.

I've always been deeply suspicious of flat management theories. It is rather woolly liberal thinking to abhor hierarchies out of principle, confusing them with bureaucracy, authoritarianism or privilege. That said, there is something appealing about the notion that everyone could be equal in status, responsibility and reward, without needing the heavy hand of stick-and-carrot authority from above to shepherd us. In fact, flat management is an echo of the political theory of anarchy, in which society might function according to the self-government of the individual. In theory, because anarchy and flat management are conspicuous by their absence as successful models of organisation.

What defeats the theory? As Bertrand Russell writes in "In Praise of Idleness", work is "...of two kinds; first, altering the position of matter at or near the earth's surface relatively to other such matter; second, telling other people to do so." In regard to the latter variety, an uncomfortable generalisation I have been forced to accept is that there are those who tell and those who are told, those who start things, and those who finish them; those who lead and those who follow; those who understand that their actions can affect the lives of others for better and worse, and can live with it, and those that can't, and won't. Sheep and shepherds. Children and adults.

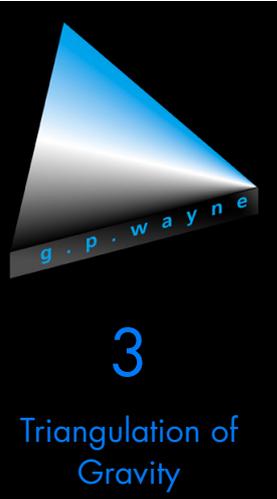
Even if this isn't a natural order of things, it is certainly an entrenched one. I'd go so far as to say that most of the prime movers I've met in my time are usually poor finishers, lacking attention to detail and forgetful of mundane tasks, especially when repetitious; the word entrepreneur springs to mind. They are rather child-like, enthusiastic, playful, imaginative; also changeable, unreliable, irresponsible, but often sufficiently self-aware to employ others to make up for these shortfalls. This has



become an acceptable sort of self-balancing paradigm in the organisational world, because there are so many people waiting to be led, while so few step up to the crease to do the leading. Actually, to extend the sporting metaphor, there are any numbers of idiots stepping up to the crease, but few among them will actually endure an innings of any duration, most ducking at the first delivery. In 35 years of working life, I have met very few people capable of fully shouldering the responsibility for both the technical aspects of running of a business, and the implicit social effects on the welfare of others in the organisation.

All organisations have the same management problem; from where do you get recruits? Getting staff/squaddies/voters to cross the line, to step forward and accept responsibility for the welfare of others, is a tough challenge, and not at all the same thing as promoting someone. So often you spot a man or woman with talent, ability or imagination who, when promoted, cannot “think out of the box” about themselves, and free themselves of a strange dependency on those they think are “above” them. I was once consulted by a company whose middle-management were shockingly ineffective decision-makers. Investigation revealed that they were given no financial information, no performance targets or indicators; decision-making processes were concealed from them and they were untrained in the evaluation of the marketing, financial or social implications of their work, actions and decisions. Yet the board were well meaning, and by no means indifferent to the quality of life of their staff, and were both liked and respected. The problem was that the staff were treated like children; as a direct consequence, they performed their duties with an appropriately carefree irresponsibility. They had no fear of failure, since it wouldn’t be theirs. Conversely, they were also denied real credit for their successes. Insecurity underpinned the corporate culture, because there is nothing scarier than forces we don’t understand. Meanwhile, the centralised decision-making meant the board, unable to delegate, was always overworked, as it laboured mightily to support all the dependants it had created, a lesson our government could do with revisiting.

Rather like parents who have sired an unreasonably large number of offspring, perhaps? It occurred to me that this was an echo of an earlier time, when the first industrialists adopted the patriarchal model to deal with the uneducated labour coming off the land into the new industrial centres. These rural people were often more of a liability than an asset, in particular when they got themselves entangled with extraordinarily dangerous machines, breaking bodies and equipment equally. Forward thinkers, the first industrial entrepreneurs, built houses, shops, churches, sports facilities and libraries for their workers. The rapid expansion, indeed explosion, of demand for mass-produced products made it obvious the owners would need managers better trained and more sophisticated than the traditional overseer, so they also invested in the education of their workforce. They could also derive an otherwise



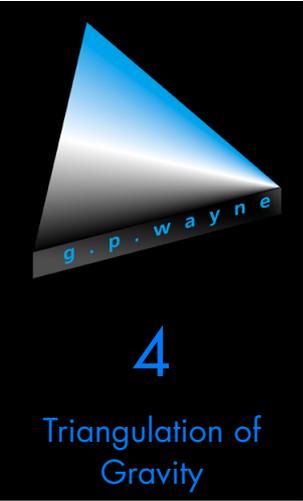
barely-deserved reputation out of their investments, one that positioned them as great philanthropists rather than chief exploiters of labour for profit, but as is so often the case, the motives of others are confused in retrospect by the diversity of effects they produce.

Patriarchy was superseded by the hierarchical model, itself strongly influenced by military organisation, the best available example of getting a lot of people to work towards a shared aim in a disciplined framework. With hierarchies in business came the cultural baggage; in the same way that wealth and privilege were key historic determinants to rank in the army or navy (the purchase of rank in the British military establishment was not abolished until 1871), the hierarchies of business management quickly came, in both the minds of the workers and owners, to stand for the same values of exclusivity, elitism and discrimination. By incorporating these values, industrial society was ushered inexorably towards the corresponding institutionalised abuses of power that we see today: more lions led by donkeys. The class system has been embedded in the hierarchies of commerce as firmly as everywhere else.

Yet there is something else about hierarchies, a subliminal suggestion of something ancient and inevitable, the appeal of an atavistic memory of human behaviour controlled by status. For humans, hierarchy is just a notion, a way of thinking about something, or at least it should be. The hierarchical structure of organisational management should not be mistaken for a representation of human society, because then you are simply perpetuating class discrimination. But I think hierarchies – and the way we think of ourselves in relation to them – exert a strange and ignoble influence on the way we think about our relationships to each other.

Think of the traditional diagram of a hierarchy as a triangle or pyramid. The mass of people are all down the base. The whole edifice rests on them, a clear illustration of who is at the bottom of the pile: the workers. Those who do well climb the pyramid towards the apex; the light; the sun. Improvement measured like this is a very clear metaphor for social status. In the higher reaches there are less people, more space (bigger offices), more light (windows!); everyone doing something “less important” is “below” you. You are, by a smaller or larger degree, less common, your shirt-collar a lighter shade of blue. How much you get paid is directly related to where you are on the vertical axis, a message clear to everyone else too, including those workers you left behind and from whom you may now be disenfranchised. This so-called class betrayal has been a popular theme in trade-unionism, novels, drama and film, in the context of military rank, social groups, organised religion and crime, even sport. Elevation in a hierarchy is often seen by others as breaking faith.

Our progress changes how we think of others. A hierarchy encourages us to see people in terms of their position in relation to ours, a fiction we accept all too readily. As we



are promoted, it seems inevitable that we start seeing some people in a discriminatory way; in terms of cost, of utility, of disposability. Those below you are depersonalised, made into units of work and payroll entries. It is one thing to have responsibility for other people and their work; it's altogether another to think that we are superior, but that is the implicit message in this way of thinking in hierarchical organisation. In contrast to the unfortunates, the people who are above you may be considered somehow "better" than you. They are certainly better informed; information flow in hierarchies is usually restrictive and tightly controlled. The higher you climb, the greater your access.

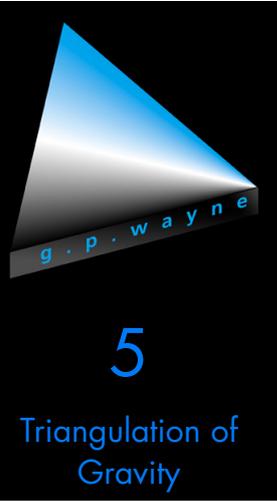
Meanwhile, there's a whole sub-class of people whose destiny is to remain at the bottom of the pile. This is a terrible and demeaning fate, but it exists because they think about themselves that way, not because managers do. The hierarchical diagram is as obvious to them as us, and positions them in a working society with brutal clarity. Worst still, we take that definition home with us, and treat it like a friend, clinging proudly to the discriminatory class roots we inherited.

All work is noble, subject to one condition – doing it to the best of our abilities; there is no job that cannot be done excellently. But when we see our status represented so badly, so inappropriately, all the heart goes out of our work. We are clearly not worth much, so we assume the same about our effort, and give little of it voluntarily.

2

A surprising thing happens when you invert the triangle, stand the pyramid on its head. The principle allusion is no longer status, but responsibility. The boss still sits at the privileged point, but the whole organisation, the whole mass of the triangle, rests on his shoulders. The executive are clearly seen to be globally responsible, for in this diagram they are the foundation on which the organisation is built. Their view is very different, too; the lofty heights have given way to an earth-bound point of vantage, where everything is obscured, a bit distant, the ant-like action viewed from the jungle floor staring up into the canopy, not a ruler from on high surveying his dominion. Omnipotence is replaced by confusion, uncertainty, humility, too much information and not enough. It's hard to be complacent when you're not sure what's happening.

Every aspirant who sees this diagram understands immediately why you get paid more when you are promoted; as your salary goes up, you accept the tightening constraints of accumulated responsibility, the funnel down which every would-be board member must travel towards the very pointy place where the buck stops. Promotion is not an escape to a nicer place where life is easier; it is the acceptance of a



concentration of responsibilities and an obligation to tread an ever-more careful path. Inverting the triangle also stops the mass of people, those who do the working, voting or fighting, from being at the bottom of the pile, a bad place to be in any diagram.

All this is only figurative, of course, but unless we counter the unproductive notions we take for granted with something more useful, the old notions rule. Anarchy and Flat Management don't answer; I believe there must always be a single captain at the helm, a clear chain of command and delineation of responsibility for everyone working with you. Hierarchies rule in my book – by default, I must say (Winston Churchill: "...democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried", which is how I feel about hierarchies) – but in my inverted model at least, here is a way of describing hierarchies with some of the less desirable aspects suppressed, responsibility clearly defined, and the most insidious of all influences made quite paradoxical: how can you infer social status from a hierarchical model when everyone above you is below you – if you see what I mean?

By the way, the generalisation I used earlier about sheep and shepherds may be observably true, but is it genetic or behavioural, instinct or learned? Out of preference and caution, I prefer behavioural and learned. I regard myself as a borderline case, wavering between the anonymous safety of the flock, and the responsibilities and rewards of the shepherd. The choice is almost like deciding whether to end my adolescence: I may be middle-aged, but the Young Turk rages inside me from time to time. At such moments – unless I attempt something foolish in the physical realm – to all intents and purposes I am 25. For a while, I want no command, no obligation to consider others, no demands on my time that divert me from self-satisfaction. Then, as an act of will, I acknowledge my age, what little wisdom I have, my common sense, my responsibilities and the demands of the real world, and I accept my fate.

Maybe some people, quite a lot of people actually, never stop being, or wanting to be, young and irresponsible, requiring parental guidance, external discipline and control, rather than do it for themselves. But with legislative adulthood they also acquire the ability to talk back. Our media are full of stories in which people blame others for the ills of the moment. Why are things bad? Because the government doesn't run the country properly. It's the fault of the police that there is so much crime; the fault of teachers that so many are ignorant; the fault of scientists and politicians that the world is getting hot; the fault of the boss when the company fails. Everything the fault of anyone but ourselves. In every case, a paternal – that is, parental – figure carries the can, so that we can continue to enjoy our protracted infancy. And since we are children, we cannot be held to blame for acting that way. Or so we like to claim.

Actually, we feel betrayed, let down again by the "adults" we trust to run our world, and fix it when it breaks. Isn't it strange how many people buy into plainly infantile



and simplistic media stories on political or economic issues, and then regurgitate them as opinion? Not if your choice is to see the world through steadfastly adolescent eyes, which are more easily pleased by the comic strip tabloid simplification of good guys in white hats than by a broadsheet of grey hats in myriad international shades. We are not brainwashed against our will by tabloid newspapers. We choose to endorse a view of society specifically proscribed in those simplistic, emotional, crude and pejorative terms, the same values represented in far too many TV programmes, adverts and Hollywood films.

The values of respect, dignity and honour, of self-improvement through the use of intelligence, of reason, of heroic betterment through struggle and adversity; the very tools the working class used a hundred years ago in an attempt to dispel the myth of their inferiority, these worthy objectives are now missing from the central drive of our culture. Our industrial society is like a massive teenage family, single-minded, stupid, strutting, sex-mad, shallow, spotty, saturated with fat, sodden with alcohol, violent and destructive at worst; apathetic, disenfranchised and acquiescent at best. Against them are ranged a few patient adults trying to counter the hormonal rage of some, while jolting others out of insipidity, promoting education, business objectives, the work ethic, political and moral manifestos, law and order, culture and so on, the basics largely enforced with the stick and carrot of wages versus unemployment and prison versus freedom. If you think I'm exaggerating, consider the mother who makes a truant out of her children by taking them shopping when they should be in class. Is that adult behaviour? What experience and understanding, what mature adult reflection, can inform parents that attack teachers, patients employing violence towards the nurses tending them, bystanders who attack firemen and ambulance drivers as they deal with emergencies? This is the work of people who don't accept that they are responsible for the horrid world they live in, all the while creating horrors afresh through their daily actions. The work of adolescents, irrespective of age.

3

You may hold it against me, but I have always had a soft spot for Star Trek. A few of my friends have wondered out loud – very loudly, actually – how a man of my sensibilities can watch this stuff so avidly, can be so committed even the third or fourth time around. For quite a while, I just didn't have an answer. I'm not a geek. I don't own an anorak. At first, I put it down to a childish escapism and a fondness for science-fiction in my youth. But when I really started to think about it, at its best, Star Trek was not escapist, it was confrontational. Using the same metaphors employed by the blacklisted US writers who worked on the Robin Hood TV series



in the UK, Star Trek took on many of the social and political issues of the time; famously, it featured the first interracial kiss ever televised in America (well nearly, anyway).

The world of Star Trek, best realised I think in the Next Generation series, was about the pursuit of life for enrichment and development, the ideal Hellenic civilisation but without the slaves, who were made redundant by wise use of technology. Resource management and science provided food and clothing and the staples of life as a right. Ingenuity and expression through action gave people individuality where such systems would otherwise impose uniformity, and violence in any form was always the very last resort. It was actually a working form of benign communism, give or take a few undocumented aspects of the Federation's administration. It is one of the few consistently virtuous and ennobling programmes on TV today, a genuinely optimistic and model example of what life could be like if mankind could transcend his grubby origins. I regret that cynical critics confuse moralising for having morals.

It is sometimes a bit depressing to think how unlikely this achievement actually seems. Far from the mature, adult civilisation out of which a utopia could emerge, I live in a teenage hell. But Star Trek (a program ironically made for teenagers) confirms for me, in the way that a great painting can make the divine tangible to a mere mortal, the value of my quest and the benefit of maintaining it, no matter how daunting the journey appears from here, even without warp drive. If such a fine example of a working utopian society can be conceived and nurtured to maturity in Hollywood, of all places, truly anything is possible. Except flat management.
