A New Look At Hierarchy

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"Dignity is not negotiable."
– Vartan Gregorian

In recent years we have come to associate much organizational ineffectiveness—inflexibility, slow decision making, lack of responsiveness to customers—with hierarchy. In aspiring to make improvements in these areas, we have attempted to flatten hierarchies, to make the infamous organizational pyramid less steep. Some have thought it might be possible to replace hierarchy entirely by devising non-hierarchical ways of allocating power among the members of an organization.

Yet hierarchy serves a useful purpose—the distribution of power, ideally in a manner that matches rank with experience, expertise and judgment. Or, to put it another way, when hierarchies are well maintained, they make sure that the person who is best qualified to make the decision is the one with the authority to make it.

Hierarchies are about power, lines of authority, and rank. It's not surprising that they are incubators for every abuse of power to which people—and the society at large—is susceptible. For example, so long as racism and sexism were undiagnosed and untreated at large, they found many hierarchies to be hospitable hosts. Now, in the aftermath of the civil rights and women's movements, most organizations are alert to the first symptoms of these afflictions. Within a few generations, racism and sexism have shifted from chronic conditions to relatively exotic diseases. An organization found playing host to either malady is on the defensive, and well-advised to remedy the situation immediately.

In this article I would like to offer two thoughts for reflection. The first is that the lingering desire to rid organizations of hierarchy may derive from a sense that something is not quite right with the power relationships in our organizations. It may be easier to

think about remaking organizations without hierarchy than remaking them with fundamentally different power relationships. The second thought I offer is that it would be easier to think about the power relationships in organizations if we had an enriched vocabulary for doing so.

New words are often slow to win their way into the lexicon. Sometimes this is because people don't want to examine the phenomenon the word defines. When "sexism" was coined there was much debate over whether it referred to anything at all. Behaviors now instantly recognized as sexist were then defended as innocent flirtation, traditional practice, theological doctrine, or just "nobody's business."

The power vested in the rank-holders at every level of a hierarchy gives them leverage over those of lower rank, shielding them from the consequences of exploiting subordinates for personal advantage. Sooner or later the high-ranking are tempted to use their position for self-aggrandizement and personal gain instead of the organization's larger purpose. Unless there's an immune system in place that detects and attacks this abuse, someone will parlay actual mastery in one realm into sovereignty in another over which he or she has no legitimate jurisdiction. When power is usurped, authority has not been earned, rank is unmerited. In order to discuss this fully, we need a word that means, "Exercising rank inappropriately." The word I have coined is *rankism*. By analogy with racism and sexism, ***rankism is abuse or discrimination based on a difference of rank***. Nest-feathering, cronyism, anonymous "peer review," corruption, and nepotism are some of the names given in the past to specific kinds of rankism.

The effects of rankism on its targets is not different from the effects of racism or sexism on minorities and women, respectively. Abuse and discrimination feels disrespectful, demeaning, and degrading to victims no matter what the excuse—race, gender, age, sexual orientation, or rank. The consequences are also the same—resentment and indignation, which, on occasion, build to violence. Such outbursts, however, do not begin to measure the toll taken by rankism, which has its main effects in subtler ways.

Rankism skews the judgment of both management and employees away from organizational goals to self-aggrandizement and self-preservation, respectively. Working for a rankist employer is an exercise in dissimulation and subterfuge. When a boss's loyalty is to himself, his employee's loyalties are to themselves. Accommodating to a rankist

boss takes a toll on health, commitment, and productivity. Protecting organizations against rankism is the heart and soul of good leadership.

A Closer Look Rank and Rankism

Rank signifies our relative place within a group. Like chickens in a pecking order, we outrank some and are outranked by others; but unlike a chicken coop, modern human societies comprise thousands of different hierarchies, and a person at the bottom of one may be at the top of another. The CEO may be a lousy golfer; the kid who can't get a date, a computer whiz.

Moreover, our rank in each of these realms is insecure: The CEO is fired; an employee is downsized.

Rank is an essential tool in the management of our lives and our institutions. Comparison and judgment are necessary to select a computer or a car, admit or reject applicants to college, or choose candidates for political office. Greater efficiency and productivity follow when we get the right person into the right job. To remain successful, an organization must appraise personnel continuously and accurately. Selectivity is predicated on ranking; without it, choice would be random. Within the niche where it has been earned, rank has proven utility, legitimacy, and commands our respect.

People of rank often find themselves in the role of judge or gatekeeper to those seeking higher rank. No system of ranking is ever perfect, but honest errors in judgment do not constitute rankism.

Nevertheless, people who play executive roles have to remain especially vigilant lest rankism creep into their decision-making or their treatment of those whose hopes rest with their judgment. The exquisite agony of decision-makers is implicit in the two opposed meanings of the word "discriminate."

On the one hand, "discriminate" means to distinguish, to discern, and to select

with intent. This is the proper job of the gatekeeper. On the other hand, "to discriminate" can also mean to ignore individual differences, lump people together and dismiss or favor them as a group. The former usage applies mainly to ideas and inanimate objects such as works of art, wines, and food, where it signals connoisseurship. To discriminate in this sense is necessary and good—it enriches our lives. The latter usage is typically applied to people, where it means mean-spirited exclusion or prejudicial treatment (for example, racism or sexism). To discriminate in this sense is unfair and unjust.

The two meanings of "discriminate" lie at the heart of the difference between "ranking" and "rankism," that is, between the appropriate uses of rank (or ranking) and the inappropriate or abusive uses of rank that we're calling rankism.

Most of us have suffered in one way or another at the hands of people who out-rank us. In fact, the high-ranking have such a consistent history of misusing the power of their position that today anyone assuming authority comes immediately under suspicion, especially from the young. The problem is not that someone is in charge. The problem is not hierarchy *per se*, but the abuse thereof.

This is a good place to clear up a common confusion about competitiveness and rankism. Striving for high rank, so long as it is fair, is not rankism. Competitiveness is not inherently rankist. On the other hand, the moment unfairness colors a contest for rank, rankism creeps in.

It can't be overemphasized that ranking is not inherently rankist any more than distinguishing between the races is racist. No moral issues arise because one person is black, another white. No moral issues arise because individuals perform differently in contests of any sort. Making choices requires discriminating among options, and ranking is simply part of that process.

Every competition involves loss. No one likes to lose, but when the contest has been fair, losers will, for the most part, accept their loss and withdraw gracefully, either to enter a contest of a different sort or to lay plans to do better next time.

But when rank is won because the rules or the judges favor some players at the expense of others, resentment builds. If unfairness persists, losers may become smolder-

ing volcanoes, dreaming of vengeance and even exacting it when they get the opportunity. School misfits turn on their classmates. Nerds, ridiculed and cast out as youths, grow up to sow computer viruses. Humiliated nations support terrorist campaigns and nurse their grievances while waiting for a chance to get even. The news is full of examples of how insulting the dignity of individuals or peoples by systematically denying them a fair chance turns them into desperados. Most, however, just nurse their wounds in quiet desperation.

Every rankist act comes up against the non-negotiability of human dignity. Under duress people may seem to compromise their dignity, but they are temporizing, awaiting the first opportunity to demand the respect we all require as human beings. Once the rank and file begin withholding their hearts and minds—and they will, from any enterprise beset with rankism—the enterprise goes into decline. The chronic rankism endemic to education—from K through graduate school—is why so many students withhold their hearts and minds from learning. Protecting our dignity trumps self-improvement.

Rankism's Toll on Productivity

A rankist system of management is one in which power is misused if not abused. Misusing power makes a system vulnerable to competition from a system unburdened by inefficiencies inherent in rankist practice. In time, such an alternative system will demonstrate its advantage by out-producing the first. The number of young upstart companies that put older inflexible ones out of business are legion. Invariably, the cause can be traced to rankist calcification.

Targeting rankism draws its ultimate justification from the ancient link between coercion and foot-dragging, the bane of slave-drivers throughout history. Where motivation is based on the fear of disobedience instead of on genuine self-interest, there are slow-downs, resistance, sabotage, guerilla warfare, and finally, revolt.

Today, employers are not dealing with slaves, though it is sometimes argued that wage-earners are wage-slaves and salaried employees are only marginally more independent. Negative motivation—fear of demotion or job loss—is now dwarfed by the positive incentive of being part of a team of responsible professionals. Eliminating rank-

ism in the work place will be as good for the bottom line as eliminating nutritional deficiencies was for the productivity of day laborers.

As rankism is identified and reduced, individual energy is catalyzed and engaged. People who feel recognized as individuals and who feel they have a fair chance at promotion give their companies their best. Companies that figure out how to give their workers a voice in management and a stake in earnings reap the benefits.

Despite their practicality in the long run, moral precepts have never counted for much in the near term. Until it shows up in the bottom line, we're not convinced. Before rankism is targeted in principle (as racism now is), it must first be demonstrated, case by case, that rankism reduces flexibility and adaptability and thereby handicaps group performance and productivity. In this respect, reform comes more easily to businesses than to educational institutions because they have the quantitative feedback of the marketplace to inform and guide them.

"Because I say so" management of the firm—as of the family—is on the way out. Moreover, employees now know that obedience does not ensure job security. "Yes men" are a doomed species. People don't want to work at companies that don't permit them to be true to themselves and afford them opportunities to make a difference. Translation: people don't want to work at rankist organizations.

As it becomes clear that more powerful non-rankist alternatives exist and work, the burden of proof shifts to those who are reluctant to move beyond rankism. Non-rankist organization incubates a surpassing power. Right makes might, not vice versa.

The competitive advantages of relatively non-rankist hierarchies are most easily discernible in institutions devoted to research and development where the very purpose of the enterprise is to discover and exploit good new ideas. Such organizations are adept at making the distinction between rank and rankism and have built a culture in which this distinction is paramount.

For example, Intel, like many technology firms, operates with the explicit understanding that any employee is free to challenge any other employee's professional views. A newly-hired twenty-year-old can challenge a director of research, or the CEO. The pol-

icy of open, free exchange regardless of rank is seen as a vital part of keeping the company a creative, productive place.

Intel's Chairman Andy Grove famously works out of an open cubicle like everyone else, and has no reserved space in the company parking lot. If he did get the customary preferential treatment, that would be an innocuous form of rankism, not worth objecting to, and perhaps even justifiable on the grounds of sparing him time. As chairman he certainly could have such perks if he chose to, so the question is, why does he refuse them?

When *Time* named Grove "Man of the Year" in 1997, Intel employees whimsically put up a sign at the parking space nearest the building's entrance reading "Reserved for Time's Man of the Year." Such appreciative humor shows a high level of awareness of the value of rank and the cost of rankism. Intel's parking policy is a symbolic expression of the company's commitment to limit the power of rank so undue deference does not dampen creativity. Rankism is perceived as a threat to good research. Condescension and arrogance are out. Open, reciprocal interaction is valued over pride of position.

Making the distinction between rank and rankism revalidates rank where it has been earned and proven within a particular domain. Once rankism is separated from rank, and rank is understood to have a particular jurisdiction, then rank again becomes synonymous with stature. Sorting out the proper and improper uses of rank restores to rank the respect it deserves. Presidents, CEOs, leaders of every kind regain their rightful, due respect—no more, no less. The only real boss is a better idea or a better question.

Rankism's Toll on Leadership

I spent my final months as a college president play-acting the part. I felt like an imposter. Half a dozen years of committee meetings, faculty meetings, trustee meetings, alumni meetings, and fund-raising had taken their toll on my enthusiasm for, and my capacity for, leadership. I couldn't stand the thought of becoming—in Yeats's telling phrase—a "smiling public man."

Long before I left the job, I was yearning for time to think, to compose myself, to make myself over. I still acted like a college president in public, but I was impersonating

a former self.

A danger leaders face is the deference their status induces others to grant them. We do them no good when we cease relating to them as fallible human beings. To keep from stagnating, everyone needs honest interaction, free of the evasions and flattery that deference to rank typically elicits. Most leaders suffer irreparable harm from the loss of honest co-equal friendships. The fawning courts of Louis XVI and Mao Zedong accelerated their departures from reality. Without continuous accurate feedback, leaders are deprived of the living truth they need to continue their personal development. Nothing substitutes for truthful personal feedback when it comes to staying alive.

Royalty had a mechanism for keeping the king from falling for his own image. It was to appoint a court jester whose job it was to remind this supreme somebody that he too was a nobody like everyone else. Only the jester had license to tell the truth and not lose his head. He functioned as an escape valve, giving voice to what everyone knew but no one could say, and so relieving pressure. Today, we roast dignitaries to the same purpose.

Historically, the transition from autocracy to democracy has gone hand in hand with ordinary people coming to see themselves as potential centers of initiative and power. Royals were stripped of their divinity and then of their temporal powers. For a time we even chopped off their heads to make the point. Now we savage them in the media, perhaps as a prelude to accepting them as the ordinary people they are. Just as attitudes toward royalty have evolved, so attitudes toward leaders of every sort have evolved: from worship to fealty, from fealty to esteem, and from esteem to a fond appreciation for peers who are temporarily playing more public roles.

Attachment to high rank is ultimately as futile and self-defeating as resignation to permanent low rank. “Somebodies” who can’t get down off their pedestals turn into statues.

A Glimpse of a Post-rankist Workplace

The generation now entering the workforce is notably less willing to put up with unfair treatment and other indignities than any of its predecessors. The young would

rather hang out on their own than be nonentities within a group whose goals they do not share. They are mobile, resourceful, multi-skilled, and readier than any generation before them to take their chances. In their detachment, they are groping for a new set of principles to govern the competition for social recognition, principles that downplay traditional career tracks, and affirm the principle of equal dignity, teamwork, and a more equitable distribution of rewards.

These attitudes herald a transformation of the workplace. Just as, in the civic realm, subjects evolved into citizens, likewise, in the realm of work, we can anticipate employees evolving into partners. A post-rankist workplace might look like this:

Rank would be awarded and held in the context of a particular task. Recognition would be given upon the completion of that task. Then rank would be dropped, only to be assumed again later when it's needed to facilitate cooperation in another context. Although it's long been a fixture of compensation packages, the correlation between decision-making and salary would be reexamined. Asking a good question—one that spares the firm the consequences of a bad decision—is as important to the bottom line as making a good decision.

Firms would incorporate into their business plans scenarios for their employees' advancement. To retain the loyalty of their co-workers, executives would show no favoritism to "somebodies" and take great care not to abridge the privileges and immunities of "nobodies." The spirit of the Fourteenth Amendment with its guarantee of "equal protection" applies to employment as it does to citizenship. Firms will take pride in being places where everyone experiences equal dignity, has equal opportunity, and receives equal justice.

Good business practice holds many lessons for educational reform. But, by their very nature, schools have got one thing right: students don't hang on until retirement or death—they graduate and move on. In a post-rankist work environment, workers will be seen less as employees, holding down a job, than as students, learning and progressing from level to level. To create room at the top so others have a chance for upward mobility, resources must be devoted to "graduating" executives. Personnel officers will assume responsibility for seeing that everyone in the firm has somewhere to go, whether inside or outside the company, and assist them in doing so. Job tenure is inherently rankist and it

has outlived its usefulness, even and especially in academia. Though tenure was originally designed to protect academic freedom, nowadays, in conjunction with the end of mandatory retirement, it both elevates educational costs and deprives a whole generation of younger scholars, many of whom are better trained than their seniors, of ever experiencing university-level teaching and research.

When people feel they are working for themselves, productivity improves. The "mailroom-to-boardroom" story will become less exceptional; employee co-owners, with a share of the equity, more common; and the income and equity gaps between the highest and lowest paid will narrow.

Since rankism is synonymous with dysfunctionality, there is no more important task of leadership than its early detection and eradication. Great leaders instinctively set an example that militates against its ever taking root. They neither indulge in it themselves, nor tolerate it among their subordinates, and their actions—from Jeanne d'Arc to Shakespeare's Henry V to Washington himself—set an example that inspires the troops.

Rankism can't be eradicated overnight, but it can be put on the defensive as we've done with other kinds of prejudice. Authority can be democratized without loss of organizational efficiency, not only in our civic institutions, but in the workplace as well. The nations that curtailed rankism in government led the world in the last century. The nations that are most successful in removing rankism from the workplace will lead in the next.

Author bio: Robert Fuller is a former president of Oberlin College. At the time of his appointment, he was the youngest college president in the U.S. His website on rankism is at <breakingranks.net>.