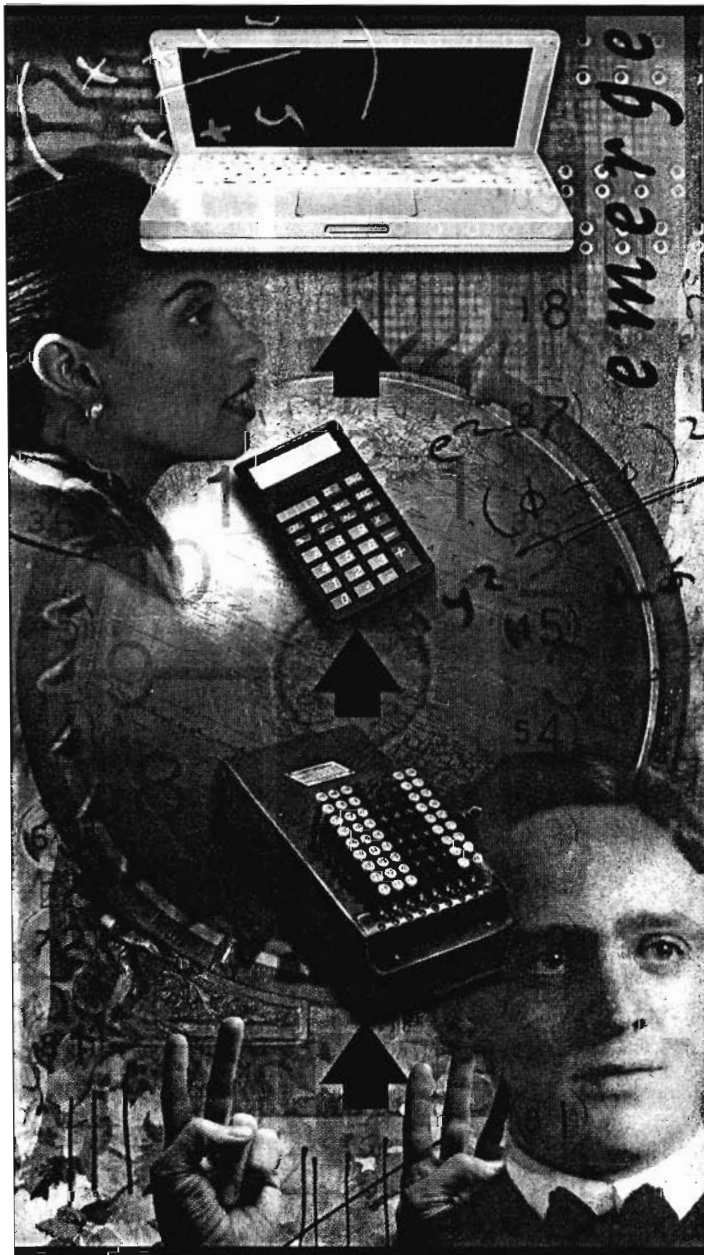


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NUMBER 21 SUMMER 2001



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# A New Look at Hierarchy

Robert W. Fuller

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 nonhierarchical ways of allocating authority among the members of an organization.

Yet hierarchy serves a useful purpose—the distribution of authority, ideally in a manner that matches rank with experience, expertise, and judgment. Or, to put it another way, well-maintained hierarchies ensure 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 society at large—are 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 superiors 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 for the organization's larger purpose. Unless there's an immune system in place that detects and attacks this abuse, some people will parlay actual mastery in one

rest with their judgment. The exquisite agony of decision makers is implicit in the two opposed meanings of the word *discriminate*.

On 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, *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 implies 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 I’m calling rankism.

Most of us have suffered in one way or another at the hands of people who outrank 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. Nonetheless, 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 smoldering 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 is an affront to 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

***The problem is not hierarchy per se,  
but the abuse thereof.***

organization incubates a surpassing power. Right makes might, not vice versa.

The competitive advantages of relatively nonrankist hierarchies are most easily discernible in institu-

### *Right makes might, not vice versa.*

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

Intel's Andy Grove famously worked out of an open cubicle like everyone else and had no reserved space in the company parking lot. If he had gotten the customary preferential treatment, that would have

been an innocuous form of rankism, not worth objecting to, and perhaps even justifiable on the grounds of sparing his time. As chairman he certainly could have such perks if he chose to, so the question is, why did 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 fundraising 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, equal friendships. The fawn-

"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

*Job tenure has outlived its usefulness,  
even—especially—in academia*

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 a form of graduation for 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—especially—in academia. Though tenure was originally designed to protect academic free-

dom, 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 in-

dulge 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 this one.

*Robert W. Fuller is a former president of Oberlin College. At the time of his appointment, he was the youngest college president in the United States. He served 15 years as chairman of Internews, a nonprofit whose mission is to set up the infrastructure for a free press in emerging democracies.*