

Reviews of *The Three Ways of Getting Things Done*:

"...the more I listen to his arguments, the more I believe he is on to something."

From Richard Donkin's review of the book in the *Financial Times*

"...presents an interesting idea eloquently and clearly"

From a review of the book in *The Economist*

"Gerard [Fairtlough] is convinced that hierarchy is neither inevitable nor sacred for running a business, contrary to widespread belief; rather, it is just one possible way to avoid chaos and get things done in organizations. In this book, Gerard shows how well alternatives, such as heterarchy and responsible autonomy, can work in practice."

From a review of the book on the *Global Business Network*

Book of the Month at metrinomics.com

"...an elegant and concise exploration of contemporary theory and practice in the governance or organisations."

Walter Truett Anderson, *World Academy of Art and Science*

"...challenges organizations to reconsider hierarchy and their dependence on it. ...of interest not only to academics and students of organizational and complexity theory, but also to anyone with an interest in the way we live and work today."

From a review by The Institute of Management Consultancy

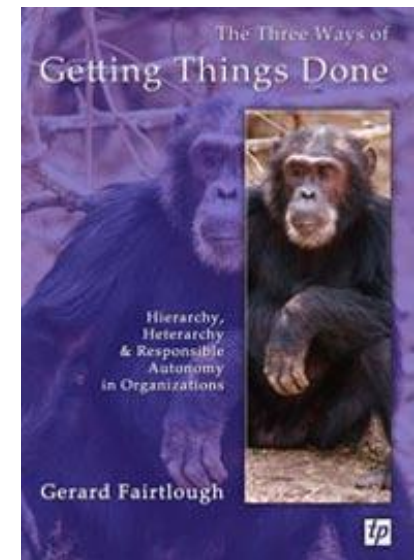
"...a diagnostic tool from which to judge the cultural climate or structural model in a given organisation... a thoughtful book that every management consultant should read..."

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The Three Ways of Getting Things Done

Hierarchy, Heterarchy and Responsible Autonomy

An Executive Summary



Gerard Fairtlough

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Introduction

*This is an executive summary of **The Three Ways of Getting Things Done**. There isn't space here to include case studies and examples, to develop arguments, to quote sources or list further reading. To read more about the full text edition (110 pages) please visit <http://www.triarchypress.co.uk/pages/book1.htm>*

Most of us are addicted to hierarchy. Addiction to hierarchy is like addiction to stress, which is stimulating and even exciting, but eventually drains our energy and spoils our lives.

How is it possible to be a hierarchy-addict without knowing it? It happens through the hegemony of hierarchy. Hegemony exists when a situation is taken for granted. Nearly everyone believes hierarchy to be a necessary part of organization. This assumption that hierarchy is inevitable is a key part of its hegemony.

Hierarchy may have genuine value, but we can only make a balanced judgment when it is seen as just one of several options. So, my aim is to:

- § show why it has such a grip on us
- § discuss it as just one way of getting things done
- § stop people thinking about it as inevitable.

A cynic might say that, if everyone assumes hierarchy is inevitable, it will be impossible to change. But 200 years ago aristocratic domination seemed inevitable. 100 years ago so did patriarchal rule. Change was strongly resisted, but it happened. Hierarchy in organizations is another idea whose end may be nigh.

A Basis for Hegemony

How Hegemony Works

Hegemony results in a way of seeing that is accepted as normal. This way of seeing has its own momentum.

There are many explanations for this, but I believe genetic predisposition is vital. Hegemony gets established when the interests of the powerful coincide with a genetic pre-disposition. Once established, hegemony becomes self-perpetuating.

Genes

Chickens have pecking orders. The dominant bird pecks all the others. Chimpanzees give us more subtle analogies. There is a hierarchy in each group - more marked among males. The top male may not be strongest: but he is usually best at manipulating social coalitions.

In humans, hierarchy emerges in pre-school children and gangs of adolescents. Culture affects such groups, but the phenomenon is almost universal - suggesting a genetic influence. Still, it doesn't make hierarchy inevitable. Rape and murder are probably also 'in our genes', but prohibitions against them often work.

That isn't the whole story. Often juniors accept their position. If you get killed attacking the top male, your genes die too. Patient, submissive behaviour may be wiser. There must be genes that predispose towards submission as well as ones encouraging dominance.

We also invest in hierarchy. When we have invested in adapting to local hierarchies, we want them to continue.

Hierarchy in Organizations

Organizations have a poor reputation - they can be rigid and slow to change. Many people have an image of themselves that depends on their hierarchical position. Without hierarchy the image might collapse. For these people, hierarchy is a vital support.

The 'Great Man'

Another reason for the persistence of hegemony is belief in the 'great man'. When something goes wrong with a business or a political party the first impulse is to look for a new CEO or leader. Of course, a dedicated, energetic, intelligent, charismatic and lucky person at the top can make a difference. But in reality, every leader depends on willing and capable followers.

Tradition

There is a long tradition of support for hierarchy in political and social science. For Hobbes, Weber and their followers, the absence of hierarchy means the loss of order, discipline, motivation and leadership.

If we take hierarchies for granted, the only way we can envisage task-division, rule-setting and culture-development is for the hierarchy to do it. We know these things are necessary and we assume that this makes hierarchy necessary too. We assume that the choice is between hierarchy and anarchy. But this is not so - there are successful alternatives.

*For more on the genetic underpinnings of hierarchy and how it works in organizations, see the full text of **The Three Ways of Getting Things Done**.*

What Organizations Need

Coordination of Ends and Means

To discuss the place of hierarchy in organizations and its alternatives, we must consider what organizations need to function effectively.

Human beings can achieve some things by themselves. But to achieve many others they need to cooperate. When people cooperate over time to get things done, there is an organization. In businesses people coordinate their actions in order to supply goods and services, and to make money. In schools, teachers cooperate to educate the young.

Whatever their purpose, organizations have to carry out various tasks. So, we can say that organizations enable people to collaborate on tasks and to achieve shared goals. Both means and ends are coordinated.

Coordination of ends and means requires four features: system, culture, leadership and power:

System

Organizations benefit from systematic procedures, routines and standard operating procedures. Proper systems avoid wasteful re-invention. They prevent sloppy practices and, if everyone follows them, serious mistakes can usually be avoided. When good systems have been established, people feel secure.

Organizations with many established systems and standard operating procedures are often called 'bureaucratic'. This implies that they are cumbersome or stifling. But systems and rules often make life easier. These are called 'enabling' systems. Enabling systems are highly desirable and differ from 'coercive' systems.

Economical, robust and user-friendly systems aren't easy to develop. But, once in place, these enabling systems appear natural and aren't burdensome. A proper enabling system is light and strong.

Organizational Culture

Systems help to coordinate action. So does an organization's culture. A shared culture makes for good communication. In a common culture, people will tell the same stories, believe the same myths and be familiar with the same images. They will share many values, so that their ideas of success and failure, for example, will be much the same.

An organization's culture can be either enabling or coercive, or some combination of the two. At one extreme, there is fear, favouritism, gossip and dishonesty. At the other, there is frankness, mutual respect, shared commitment to goals, loyalty and fun.

Leadership

A leader can make sense of what is happening in and around the organization and help others do the same. A leader has the vision to see what should be done and can persuade others to follow. A common picture

of a leader is a charismatic, egocentric individual who tells others what to do. But leadership doesn't have to be like that.

Leadership is needed to define an organization's purposes, and to make sure these purposes are understood and agreed. At times, purposes will have to evolve and leadership will then be necessary in proposing and negotiating changes.

In principle, anyone in an organization can be a leader. Leaders do not have to be officially appointed. Anyone committed to achieving the organization's purposes can exercise leadership, sometimes only occasionally. When everyone has the opportunity to be a leader, and a good many people exercise it, this is called 'dispersed leadership'.

Power

Power is a necessary part of getting things done. In most organizations today, power is concealed - because a display of power may provoke resistance and concealed power is less likely to be questioned.

Power can operate in impersonal ways through rules and routines, belief systems and ideologies. Of course, behind impersonal power are actual people. Somewhere, individuals are making the rules, doing the indoctrination, organizing the discipline, or granting membership.

Power is used to reinforce the hegemony of hierarchy and to achieve organizational aims. Nearly always, these two uses of power are closely intertwined,

making it hard to understand the nature of power in organizations. Understanding hierarchy will make it easier to understand the operation of power, both in general and in a particular organization.

Struggle within an organization is inevitable: individual aims vary and opinions differ. Diversity in views is highly desirable, providing differences can be resolved constructively. Hierarchical resolution of disputes is what we're familiar with. It can provide a quick fix, but better means are available.

'Exit' and 'Voice'

In addition to these four needs, there are two further factors to consider. Two universal mechanisms push failing organizations towards improvement: customers, party supporters or staff can respond in either or both of two ways: 'exit' and 'voice'.

'Exit' is when customers stop buying, supporters stop voting, or staff resign. 'Voice' is when these groups complain. Traditional managements see exit as treason and voice as mutiny. But sooner or later they have to take note.

*For more on the thinking behind systems, culture, leadership and power, see the full text of **The Three Ways of Getting Things Done**.*

3 Ways of Getting Things Done

Hierarchy

I believe that in organizations there are only three fundamental ways of getting things done: hierarchy, heterarchy and responsible autonomy.

Hierarchy starts with a single supreme ruler, who passes authority down the organizational pyramid. In organizations the idea of single, hierarchical rule retains its power. But in religion, politics and the family, the idea of single rule has often been qualified. Greece and Rome had pantheons of gods. In Latin America, dictatorship often meant a Junta. Even in the traditional family, mother was often the CEO.

Heterarchy

Heterarchy means 'multiple rule', a balance of powers rather than the single rule of hierarchy. It is a less familiar term, though the idea of shared rule has been around for a long time:

- § Partnerships, like those in law firms, are partly heterarchical. At least in small firms, all partners are of roughly equal status, though they may elect a managing partner, thus introducing an element of hierarchy. Partners with new ideas must convince their peers of the merits of the proposal.
- § Heterarchical relations are possible between departments. Units like finance and HR have authority over the way other units operate. For example, an HR department can insist that

recruitment be carried out in a certain way. But the HR department is accountable to other departments for the effectiveness of its services.

- § Strategic alliances between businesses are now common. The relationship between the businesses is heterarchical: each exerts an influence on the other and, in theory, neither dominates the other.

Responsible Autonomy

With Responsible Autonomy, an individual or group has autonomy to decide what to do, but is accountable for its decisions. It might be called 'no rule' or no *external* rule. Accountability distinguishes responsible autonomy from anarchy. Autonomy requires clear boundaries at which external direction stops. Here are some examples:

- § Scientific research is often conducted by autonomous groups, led by principal investigators. The freedom to choose research topics and to recruit people provides autonomy. The group's continued existence depends on it continuing to publish good science - this provides accountability.
- § Investment management institutions often give individual fund managers a lot of autonomy. Autonomy is provided by the internal policies of the investment institution. Accountability is provided by the performance of the fund.

Critique and Dispute Resolution

'Critique' describes the process of evaluation, by external agencies, of the results of an autonomous

unit. It is what makes autonomy responsible and accountable. A good example is a company audit.

Organizations generally use hierarchical methods to resolve disputes - but it is perfectly possible to work out independent, heterarchical means of arbitration by third parties.

Heterarchy Compared to Responsible Autonomy

These two ways of getting things done are similar in being non-hierarchical. But heterarchy involves continuous interactions between individuals and units as they decide what to do and how to work together. This takes time and effort - a possible disadvantage for heterarchy. Responsible autonomy, if set up properly, means sub-units are much more self-sufficient and interaction between them less intense.

Ideal Types

Each of the three ways of getting things done is an 'ideal type': the concept is not found in its pure form. For instance, no hierarchy can control everything. **Every organization is a mixture of hierarchy, heterarchy and autonomy - in varying proportions.**

*For more on the alternatives to hierarchy, see the full text of **The Three Ways of Getting Things Done**.*

Advantages of the 3 Ways

Advantages of Hierarchy

Familiarity is the main advantage of hierarchy. We all have long experience of this approach. Familiar ways are reassuring. Hierarchy not only feels natural, but it actually is natural - in the sense that humans have an inbuilt tendency towards it. Familiarity and naturalness are undeniable advantages of hierarchy.

Other claims made for hierarchy are that it:

- § prevents chaos and produces order
- § enables leadership to emerge
- § ensures the best people get the top jobs
- § gives people something to strive for
- § offers clarity and certainty.

This is a formidable list of potential advantages for hierarchy. I'll discuss them later. But let's see what advantages there are for the other approaches.

Advantages of Heterarchy

The advantages of heterarchy are that it:

- § makes rulers more accountable
- § discourages tyranny
- § requires personal responsibility
- § ensures commitment to the organization's vision and values
- § delivers creative, cooperative solutions
- § fosters continuing learning
- § fosters skills like negotiation and facilitation
- § permits constant change and adaptation
- § draws on diverse talents and skills.

Advantages of Responsible Autonomy

Several of the advantages of heterarchy also apply to autonomy: autonomy suits a pluralistic society and is a good way of making use of diverse talents.

A possible advantage is the avoidance of tyranny - but this is more complicated than in the case of heterarchy. If an organization is structured to give genuine autonomy to its sub-units, it will greatly reduce the danger of a tyranny imposed on these sub-units. But that does not necessarily prevent tyranny *within* any particular autonomous sub-unit.

There are advantages particular to autonomy:

- § it removes the delays and distortions that occur in a centralized system
- § it can generate systems that lead to innovation and better performance.

*For more on the advantages of hierarchy and responsible autonomy, see the full text of **The Three Ways of Getting Things Done**.*

Blending the 3 Ways

Contingency Theories of Organization

It would be easier if there were one universal way to organize. But organizations differ in size, in their purposes, and in the technology they use, so the best way to get things done also differs. The idea that the best way will vary according to circumstances is called 'the contingency theory of organizations'. One contingency theory offers four organizational styles:

- § The **bureaucratic** style (decentralised, formalised and specialised) has plenty of hierarchy. Coercive systems, a rule-based culture and remote leadership make it inflexible and uncreative.
- § The **mechanistic** style, seen in assembly-line production, (specialized tasks, formalized procedures and centralized decision-making) is authoritarian. Hierarchy predominates again. Leadership comes from the hierarchy, with counter-leadership from unions.
- § The **simple** style, seen in small businesses, (unbureaucratic; centralized decision-making; non-specialised work) has more heterarchy. Things get done by informal coordination.
- § The **organic** style, seen in R&D organizations, (flexible and decentralized; staff have wide responsibilities) has more autonomy.

Style	Example	Hierarchy	Heterarchy	Autonomy
Bureaucratic	Government	60%	10%	30%
Mechanistic	Factory	75%	25%	nil
Organic	R and D	30%	50%	20%
Simple	Small firm	60%	40%	nil

The percentages I've suggested will vary from case to case, and over time, and are only indications.

The Future of Work

Computers and the Internet are leading to radically decentralized decision-making and some organizations are moving from command-and-control to coordinate-and-cultivate. Management's job becomes one of facilitating goal-setting, standard-setting and value-articulation. This allows the organization to get things done through heterarchical interaction. More organizations may develop blends in which heterarchy predominates, though it would be naïve to expect hierarchy to disappear.

Force-Based Organizations

Recent thinking about force-based organizations - armed forces, police and prison officers - suggests that responsible autonomy and heterarchy are superior to hierarchy. Military doctrine now stresses individual initiative over waiting for orders.

*For more on contingency theories, see the full text of **The Three Ways of Getting Things Done**.*

Drivers of Change

Skills

The skills and institutional mechanisms that can help an organization move away from hierarchy include:

- § Clear *conceptual thinking*
- § *Interpersonal process skills* - listening, negotiation, facilitation, effective meetings skills, etc.
- § *Teamwork skills*: attention to task and process; introducing new members; using the strengths and weaknesses of team-members.
- § Skills for *openness* in an organization must be learnt - most people's experience is of secrecy.
- § Skills involved in building *mutual respect* between everyone in an organization.

Next I'll discuss institutional mechanisms that help organizations move towards heterarchy.

Democracy

The first mechanism is organizational democracy/ voting. Democracy can have an important role in making heterarchy work well in organizations - for example, in universities and professional service firms. Voting by partners in professional firms is one element in achieving effective heterarchy along with the development of individual talent, performance reviews, task rotation, and a culture that balances individualism, collective responsibility and leadership.

Separation of Powers

Most organizations have some separation of powers: the board of directors monitors the CEO; particular staff are responsible for internal audit and safety. Here are other suggestions for a separation of powers:

- § an expanded ombudsman function, able to investigate a wide range of wrongdoings.
- § separating the setting of vision, values and purpose from the day-to-day running of affairs.
- § separating operations management from the tasks of hiring, training, appraising and rewarding staff.

Job Rotation

Job rotation is usual in professional service firms and in universities. In a heterarchy, the locus of effective power varies over time; new talents can be deployed as circumstances change. As projects progress, those who contributed most at first may not be best suited for the later stages. In a heterarchy, handing on leadership seems natural. By contrast a hierarchy wants the presently powerful to retain their power.

Project Leadership

Various sporting analogies are used here:

- § The **relay race** analogy, where the baton is handed on as a project progresses.
- § The **rugby** style, in which the leadership is fluidly passed among players, is a self-organizing process, facilitated by training and commitment.

§ The **American football** style has a game plan for each stage. Once the game plan has been agreed, players follow it, using rugby-style tactical cooperation within its strategic framework.

In these examples, heterarchy is blended with hierarchy or autonomy. The relay race suggests autonomous groups working on each phase. The rugby style has less autonomy and more heterarchy: several groups are involved on a project simultaneously. The American football style includes some hierarchy, but a peer group can do strategic reviews.

Selection by Lot

In ancient Athens, most of the officials concerned with civilian administration were chosen by lot. In today's organizations, some allocation of jobs by lot can also be useful. Consultative bodies can give guidance at the early stages of policy formulation. Members can be chosen, by lot, from those willing to serve.

Reward Systems

Hierarchies have systems for salaries and benefits: these are linked to rank and position. Heterarchies de-couple reward from position/rank. They may not be egalitarian - bonuses are paid for achievements - but a committee from across the organization can decide on bonuses and rewards. De-coupling reward from hierarchy avoids over-promotion.

Things That Help Heterarchy

- § The **idea of heterarchy** is a mystery to most people. Better understanding of it is vital.
- § Special **individual skill sets** are needed - see 7.1.
- § **Institutional mechanisms** include: democracy/ voting, separation of powers, job rotation, selection by lot, non-hierarchical reward systems.
- § Heterarchy works best in **small organizations**.

Things that Help Responsible Autonomy

Moving towards greater autonomy is simpler than moving towards heterarchy. Some guidelines:

- § Ask whether autonomy is the **right way** to go, rather than better heterarchy? Autonomy may be simpler but will it get things done in the right way?
- § Look at **scale**. Is it right to give autonomy to a small, self-organizing team? Would a compartment of a few hundred people be the right size? Is a larger sub-unit a better size for the tasks involved?
- § The **boundaries** of the autonomous unit's field of action and responsibilities need to be defined.
- § **Critique** is needed. The autonomous unit must know when and how it will be held to account.
- § A **dispute resolution** procedure should be set up.

*For more on how to enable heterarchy and autonomy, see the full text of **The Three Ways of Getting Things Done**.*

What is to be Done?

Hierarchy is so entrenched that a complete change will take centuries. Long-term change has to be achieved through smaller, short-term changes. In conclusion I suggest four principles:

- § **Understanding** the grip of hierarchy, and knowing the alternatives, will help us move away from it.
- § **Innovation** will enable us to discover all kinds of new ways of getting things done.
- § **Balance** is needed in moving towards heterarchy. The ideal should be balanced against the possible.
- § **Courage** is needed in confronting vested interests. I do not recommend a headlong attack, rather the sustained exercise of people's leadership potential.

Enormous energy goes into propping up hierarchy. Releasing this energy will bring great benefits. It will allow organizations to emerge that are more effective at getting things done and better places to work in.

There are strong reasons (relating to effectiveness and better use of human potential) for exploring a shift away from hierarchy. To do this, let us summon up our energy, courage and organizational imagination.

*For four detailed case studies of heterarchy in action, see the full text of **The Three Ways of Getting Things Done**.*

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