

Social control (systems)

Unedited posts from archives of CSG-L (see INTROCSG.NET):

Date: Thu Apr 09, 1992 5:56 pm PST
Subject: social control

[From Bill Powers (920409.1900)] Ken Hacker (920408)

My position is that social or business organizations can't literally be control systems in the same sense that an organism is one. The basic reason is that in organisms, there are components specialized to perform single aspects of a control process AND NOTHING ELSE. A muscle is neither a perceptual function nor a comparator, nor can it be either one. A sensory nerve-ending reports the intensity of stimulation reaching it, but offers no opinions about the larger patterns of which that one stimulus is a part. So there are no problems within an organism of one component usurping the functions of another, and the whole can work smoothly as an organic system.

Organizations can be constructed deliberately so as to mimic or simulate control systems. In my opinion, such organizations work in spite of this attempt to imitate a control system, not because of it. The difficulty with trying to build a simulated organism using people as the components is that the higher levels can't simply assume unquestioning obedience by the lower levels -- not realistically. Neither can the higher levels confidently take reports relayed from lower levels as truthful representations of what is being perceived at the lower levels.

The traditional form of organizations puts a commander-in-chief in charge, loosely answerable to a committee but mostly in terms of the CEO's own choosing. The idea is to focus the major decisions in one person who will not be paralyzed by conflicting considerations. Traditionally, however, this person issues orders to lower levels of management, who in turn issue orders to sub-managers, and so on down to the supervisors of the workforce. The workforce, the "muscles" of the organization, do as they are told and accept whatever recompense is indicated by the economics of production, sales, reserves, capital investment, and profit to the shareholders. So at all levels lower than the CEO, the success of the corporation depends on its operating like a control system: adopting whatever goals are given, and seeing to it that they are met.

This is a power-based structure. People at any level must do as they are told or be replaced. They are not allowed a choice: if they were able to substitute their personal objectives for the ones they are commanded to meet, the CEO would lose control. They, in turn, can offer their subordinates little leeway because they are not free to alter their own objectives. The entire structure depends on obedience, just as in organic control systems.

And that is the problem: people will not work that way. The toiler in the engine-room has opinions about company policy, and also has many other objectives that have nothing to do with the job. What actually happens in organizations like these is that each person does what he or she considers to be the right job, and if that doesn't jibe with the objectives of higher management, the person simply reports what the managers want to hear and goes on interpreting orders as the individual thinks best. I have never worked in a company where this has not been the main mode of operation.

The lowest levels of management are quite aware of this situation and know there is nothing they can do about it. But in my experience, awareness of what is really going on becomes less and less as the level of management gets higher, until at a certain level the managers tend to believe that the company is running exactly as they order it to run. What they don't realize is that only the ability of the lower levels to reinterpret orders and tell half-truths in their reports enables the organization to work at all. The higher the level of management, the less the managers know about the specifics of the organization. They make disastrous decisions which are prevented from being disastrous by the re-interpretations at the lower levels. As a consequence, of course, the upper managers remain unaware of just how bad their decisions have been -- somehow, the desired objective is brought about. They believe that

their decisions account for the successes of the organization, where in fact the organization has succeeded by essentially ignoring everything but the desire that the decision was supposed to accomplish.

I'm speaking of a traditional organization, which is traditional in that it represents an attempt to reproduce in a social system the top-down hierarchical control system that is inherent in every person. What makes such social systems seem to work is not the overt structure, but the fact that the people in the organization have decided to support the overall policies and goals of the organization, and take it upon themselves, in their own interests, to do what they can to assure success in spite of mistakes and misconceptions by various individuals. When that commitment to some overall concept of the organization is missing, the inevitable result is internal conflict, loss of coherence, and ultimately failure of the organization. When management makes the mistake of enforcing its decisions at all costs, the people do as they are told instead of doing what is required. The result is disaster.

So I claim that for any organization to succeed, it needs to be structured in some way other than as a top-down hierarchy. I'm not saying that it's impossible to simulate a control hierarchy in an organization. I'm just saying that to do so is a mistake.

Best, Bill P.