

Is the chain of command working for you?

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Abstract:

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance of having a chain of command strategy, in particular with staff repurposing activities.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper refers to field literature to support this concept.

Findings – The literature and readings cited demonstrate need and consideration.

Originality/value – The paper highlights considerations needed for present decision making that will have future impact.

Keywords: Authority | Chain of command | Hierarchy | Repurposing | Library

Article:

As libraries embrace the changes that are impacting their organizations, maintaining organizational structure is essential to having an effective and efficient operation that will continue to produce results and provide services as expected and needed by patrons, clients and students. Having an organizational structure that aligns with the mission and objectives of the library is critical and utilizing the elements of creating those structures are necessary to achieve full potential. Those basic elements typically are; job design, departmentation, delegation, span of control and chain of command. Having a strong and proper chain of command, no matter how the organization is structured, will provide increased benefit through tough periods of financial instability.

As an element of organizational structure, the chain of command refers to an organization's hierarchy of reporting relationships. This is important for all personnel within the organization to have a line of supervision for providing both direction and guidance but also to troubleshoot and advocate for resources and other needs related to accomplishment of goals. The chain of command not only establishes accountability, it lays out an organization's lines of authority and decision-making power. A proper chain of command ensures that every task, job position and department has one person assuming responsibility for performance.

Libraries however; tend to be different than other organizations as it relates to creating authoritarian structure. Librarians by nature advocate and support information sharing and broadly network in a variety of ways. This could lend itself to an independent and innovative thinking staff that overlooks the need for structure and authoritative support in their efforts. Resource allocation can become at cross purposes, or in conflict, if the chain of command is not driving the strategic need and prioritizing total organizational efforts.

A command chain or hierarchical structure should not just happen randomly. Creating the hierarchy with set responsibilities should occur purposefully and in support of organizational structure and needs, especially with the type of reorganizations that libraries are considering during changes to the economic environment such as seen in the last several years. Planners should first consider the organization's goals since organizational structure must support strategy. They should next determine the tasks needed to reach the goals. Departmentalization follows as planners decide how to group the tasks. Grouping affects resource sharing and the ease with which people communicate and coordinate work. After departmentalizing, individual assignments should be assigned with authority and responsibility for tasks and areas or specialization. Once authority is assigned, planners can finally lay out the relationships between positions, thereby creating a chain of command.

According to its original proponent, Henri Fayol (1841-1925), in his 14 management principles, "the clearer cut the chain of command, the more effective the decision making process and greater the efficiency". Fayol is cited in the Encyclopedia of Management (5th ed.) in regard to the efficiency of singular reporting structures. Military forces are an example of straight chain of command that extends in unbroken line from the top brass to ranks.

But there are also inherent weaknesses in blind adherence to the chain of command. Communication issues or delays can become critical issues with a top down approach. Library

organizations do not typically need such a strict top down; multiple layered approach, but tend to have a flatter structure in which departments and managers has a wide span of control. Fewer managers are needed in middle management, so the organization has less of a power hierarchy. These are characteristics found in organic organizational structures. In organic structures, the chain of command's importance is de-emphasized, since power is distributed among employees.

While maintaining a clear chain of command can be important to operational efficiency and accountability, understanding the human side of leadership and motivation of employees as well as supervisors should be considered as well. In their book *Being the Boss: The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader*, Hill and Lineback (2011) discuss the limits of authority in terms of commitment and motivation to drive change and work performance. This is sometimes referred to as the complexity of chain of command because it's not absolute in dealing with employees in a positive way.

Furthermore, employees who break the chain of command by circumventing their supervisors can impact supervisor morale within the organization. Kassing (2009) discusses the reasons that cause employees to circumvent their supervisors which can provide some good insight into supervisor performance and the strength of the organization's command hierarchy. This can become a flag in which to address either constructive or destructive elements within employee/supervisor relationships. Either way, the opportunity exists to flush out issues that cause the chain of command to be circumvented and help to identify and address weak links in order to strengthen the relationships that support the overall organizational structure.

Usually supervisors who are weak links in the chain stand out from a performance perspective. What about multiple weak links within the organizational structure? It is possible for to have a series of weak performers in the same functional area that are not easily identified? South and Matejka (2007) address that possibility by what they called the Multiple Weak Link (MLW) Syndrome. They provide indicators of such occurrences and cases studies, but they also suggest that reorganizing and considering changes to how the organizational structure is formed to be an appropriate course of action for improving overall performance.

Reorganizations

What works best for each organization can depend on several factors. For example, VanDuinkerken and Mosley (2011) discuss the concept that in making organizational changes, existing and longer term employees are harder to place in new organizational structures due to the perceived notions that they have developed over the years. In others words they are more resistant to change. They also point out that managers and supervisors should be coached on their roles within the chain of command so as to not convey overly authoritative roles or approach subordinates with an “I know what's best for you” point of view.

Repurposing of staff is an important component of the types of changes being made to library organizations across the country based on economic needs, changing patron expectations and new technologies that guiding what can be accomplished as well as future goals being developed. Hernon and Matthews (2013) address these actions by discussing the need for library staff to identify and develop new skills, abilities and knowledge in order to stay ahead of a changing and dynamic information environment. Repurposing staff and work related priorities will create different organizational structures that also rely on some form of command structure to maintain accountability for individual work functions. There will also continue to be the need for authoritative decisions related to total organization accountability to the larger institution and stakeholders, so a chain of authority is still warranted.

In many cases repurposing and reorganization of staff will create flatter organizations with less administrative or supervisory elements. In these flatter organizations, employee motivation is critical for overall success. Kouzes and Posner (1995) address the needs of flatter organizational hierarchy by advocating an empowered approach to management. They feel that sharing power and information helps strengthens others ability to perform as needed. This point of view supports the concept of greater organizational efficiency through the sharing of power and knowledge. This too can be inferred from Hernon's and Matthews reflections on libraries of the future.

Conclusions

Libraries have seen many changes over the recent years related primarily to actions forced by economic shortfalls and changes to technology driven by consumer demand. For a library to function effectively a chain of command needs to be in place to provide the structure needed for decision making, functional accountability and performance efficiency. How that chain looks depends on the organizations ability and desire to share authority and information broadly, yet

maintain disciplines to be accountable to administrations, funding authorities and patron/clients. Awareness of how repurposing can affect the chain of command is part of the overall strategy in making changes and should be part of the consideration given to making those changes.

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