



# THE DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURE

**T**HE typical school system is organizationally arranged on the line-of-authority model of business and industry. It may even more generally follow the line and staff organizational plan of the armed services.

These models have many deficiencies when applied to a public school system. They restrict information, create false hierarchies, and hold supervisory and teaching personnel accountable without assuring them of necessary support. This article provides a critical analysis of the characteristics of the industrial/armed services models and presents two alternative solutions to some of the problems they cause.

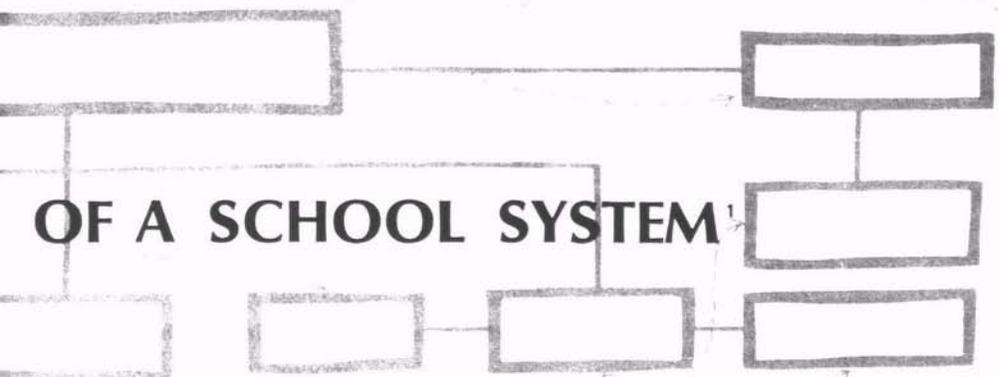
Theoretically, according to the aforementioned organizational models, each school administrator or supervisor is responsible for more work than he can personally do. Therefore, he delegates part of his responsibilities to others, who are then said to report to him. If this network is considered from the center (the superintendent) to the periphery of the organization (the teacher), then this outer direction would be called the Line of Delegation. In the reverse, considering the organization of a typical school system from the subordinate inward to the person who delegates responsibilities, the same network is called the Line of Accountability.

The Line of Delegation/Accountability is commonly referred to as the Chain of Command. In some organizations it is known as In-Line Structure.

The characteristics of such an organizational plan are:

1. To designate professional positions, such as: Superintendent of School, Assistant Superintendents, Supervisors and Directors, Principals, Teachers
2. To show relationships of people to authority, such as: Assistant Superintendents are subordinate to Superintendents; Supervisors and Directors are subordinate to Assistant Superintendents; Principals are subordinate to Supervisors and Directors; Teachers are subordinate to Principals
3. To display the chain of command (delegation), such as: delegation of authority from Superintendent to Assistant Superintendent; from Assistant Superintendent to Directors or Supervisors; from Directors or Supervisors to Principals; from Principals to Teachers
4. To show designation of positions of accountability in line positions. (For examples, see Figure 1.)

Nearly all social scientists who have studied organization recognize that the In-Line Structure is a normative fiction. It does not describe what exists, but what managers think ought to exist. Any management text



# OF A SCHOOL SYSTEM<sup>1</sup>

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demonstrates this by discussing the "formal" organization as different from the "informal" organization. Observations show that most people in an organization have work to do coming from many different sources and not just from one. In the whole realm of profession-client relationships as applicable to student-teacher relationships, the in-line organization breaks down. While official accountability is a feeling of obligation for the accomplishment of work delegated by one's "superior," most school people also feel and should feel accountable to others in the organization and to their clients (students) for whom they provide service.

The seemingly straightforward concept of the Line of Delegation or the Chain of Command turns out, in fact, to be a tremendously oversimplified picture of organizational structure. Moreover, this concept takes care of only one aspect of accountability, that of the subordinate to a person in a superior authoritative position.

This organizational chart concept of In-Line Delegation fails on several counts.

1. It does not show how the "informal" organization works.

2. It does not show the accountability of the hierarchical positions to those lower on the chart.

3. It depersonalizes the people in the organization by making them stereotyped positions in boxes on a chart.

4. It oversimplifies the complex nature of an organization.

5. It restricts communication to "going through channels," sometimes through several levels, before a decision can be obtained. For example: A teacher wants to order a special set of supplies. He must ask the principal, who in turn asks a director, who in turn asks the assistant superintendent, who in turn requests permission from the superintendent.

6. It restricts information up the organization: Each person in the line receives only that information which the people reporting to him want him to have or think he needs.

7. It promotes suspicion and rumor. People down the organization simply do not know what is going on and are therefore prey to rumors and discontent. They develop a feeling of hopelessness and despair when complex situations arise over which they feel they have no authority.

<sup>1</sup> This article is based partially on work done by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Oregon, in the development of instructional systems which provide increased problem-solving capabilities for teachers and administrators.

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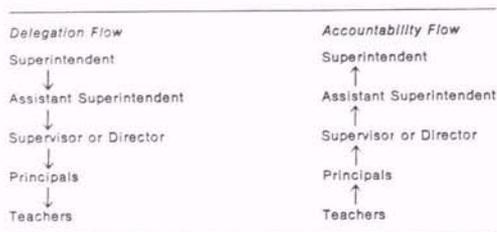


Figure 1. Examples of Flow of Delegation and of Accountability

As John L. Wallen explains it,

One of the favorite ways people explain the actions of others is in terms of the other person's motivation. As people become more isolated from each other and have access to less and less information in common, the tendency increases to interpret actions as evidence of plots and counterplots, political maneuvers, etc. If the result of a lack of coordination is believed deliberately intended, then, obviously, somebody is suspected of having harmful or destructive intentions. An emphasis on "going through channels" thus results in an increase of distrust and suspicion which further increases the isolation and problems of coordination.<sup>2</sup>

Two major efforts can be undertaken by school administrators to overcome most of these deficiencies. If In-Line organizational charts are necessary, then they should be supplemented by two other structural elements:

1. The Decision-Making Structure of an organization can be charted as it really is and ought to be, and
2. The accountability of persons "down the organization" as well as "up the organization" can also be charted so that those in authoritative positions can be held accountable for services they must perform.

<sup>2</sup> John L. Wallen. "Charting the Decision Making Structure of an Organization." Portland, Oregon: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, May 1970. pp. 2-3.

## Charting the Decision-Making Structure

The preparation of a decision chart is not a complicated process, but how it is prepared and who participates in the preparation are very important. Those who are affected by the decisions should participate in the process.

The chart simply lists on one axis the decision points which are important, and on another axis the persons who:

1. Need to start and carry out the task (Z)
2. Must be consulted for advice (C)
3. Must approve the action (A)
4. Must be informed of the decision (I).

The symbols are used to designate the type of function on the chart for each person.

Applying this technique to a task of selecting educational materials (textbooks, tests, and supplies), the chart might look like Figure 2.

This sample is a plausible, tentative fixing of decision-making points for the important activity of selecting and purchasing instructional materials. It should have been formulated by representatives of each group so that each person could have his input in the process.

All charts are held as tentative, to be tried and revised by all concerned as the process is put into practice. The chart clearly illustrates to all concerned who is involved in the decision, who carries out the activity (Z), who must be consulted (C), who must approve the plan (A), and who must be informed (I).

The device, simple as it is, gives another dimension to accountability. It also provides for systematic participation by concerned personnel in the process. Above all, it makes the

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<b>1976</b>	March 14-17	Miami Beach	<i>Convention Center</i>

Selecting Educational Materials  
(textbooks, tests, supplies, etc.)

Decision points	Teacher Committee	Principal	Supervisor	Assistant Superintendent	Superintendent	Board of Education
1. Preparing educational specifications	C	I	Z		A	I
2. Reviewing materials	Z	I	C	A	A	I
3. Recommending purchase	I	Z	C	A	A	
4. Purchasing	I	I	I	Z	A	A
5. Distributing	I	I	I	Z	I	I
6. _____						

Figure 2. Decision Matrix<sup>3</sup>

process explicit and reduces suspicion of the motives of others in the orderly functions important to the school organization.

### Accountability in Supervision

The other dimension of accountability, that of persons in authority toward those supervised, should also be spelled out. Accountability should influence the behavior of both the supervisor and those whom he supervises. A major function of a person in a supervisory position should be to assist those whom he supervises to establish goals and work plans. The supervisor must meet with subordinates to establish mutually agreed upon goals to be achieved by that subordinate. These goals must, of course, serve the function of the organization.

Supervisory support is then given in helping those supervised to carry out the functions necessary to achieve the goals. The supervisor must maintain a close relationship with the subordinate in an effort to support his work, give encouragement, necessary approval or disapproval, and consultation.

The supervisor must also facilitate the work of the subordinate by providing the following services:

1. Acquisition of necessary material resources
2. Acquisition of necessary personnel resources

<sup>3</sup> This example is based on the technique explained in: *ibid.*, p. 6.

3. Providing rapid and decisive review of work as required by the work plans

4. Provide consultation to subordinates either personally or through advisory groups or consultants.

Without such support, the achievement of the goals is impossible. Thus, accountability is a two-way street.

1. The supervisor shall be accountable for the provision of supervisory services and leadership.

2. Subordinates shall be held accountable for the attainment of goals as established cooperatively with the supervisor but only to the extent that he receives support.

Structuring processes may be tedious, but it is important if a complex organization such as a school system is to achieve its goals with each member contributing at his highest level of efficiency. This article has analyzed the usual in-line organizational plan, the characteristics of such a structure, and its principal inadequacies.

Two alternatives have been offered. One is a technique for making the decision-making structure explicit within the organization. The other alternative solution is to spell out as carefully the accountability line "down the organization" as it usually is "up the organization."

The application of these techniques can make the crucial difference between a smooth-running, efficient school organization and one that lacks the necessary teamwork to achieve its goals. □

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