

## LARGE ORGANISATIONS & THE SYSTEM'S APPROACH\*

by Masood Hasan

NOT so very long ago, at least very much in our lifetime, the largest organisations were dwarfs compared to the behemoths we have now. The rules that proved effective in the past cannot be expected to be instrumental in producing adequate results today. In fact, blind adherence to effete, outmoded and antediluvian ways of doing things is producing greater and greater "quantities" of chaos! What is required is a new approach. It is possible only if those in authority, at their respective levels, are willing to go in for a little bit of introspection in an attempt to review as to how things are being "achieved" by the organisations/departments they are in and whether results are in furtherance of the organizational goals.

Large size is synonymous with complexity. All this has been brought about through man's indefatigable pursuit of knowledge. Breaking a problem down to size, compartmentalizing it as physical, chemical, financial, medical, technical, psychological or anthropological and then applying the respective disciplines/methodology to bring about resolution are our present day means of doing our daily work. The inability of the human being to solve complex problems without an analytical effort is at the root of functional fragmentation. Functional specialization has led to spectacular advances in increasingly decreasing time spans. It has also led to quick unbudgeted expansion all round. Whether quick expansion is of a personal or impersonal nature many problems (complexity) are thrown up.

We are presently riding on a crest of a plethora of data (paper work) created out of a high standard of individual analytical fact finding effort. What we lack is a means of synthesizing or integrating the lot into something meaningful. The total is not the sum of the parts. This is quite apparent if one looks around at any organisation that has grown quickly: the sum of the individual parts comes pretty close to chaos! Why is it so? The reason is: that interaction between the different individual parts of organizational bodies has been ignored.

### LESSON

We should learn a lesson from the training of doctors. A medical student, even though intending to go in for specialization of, say, the eyes, has to spend a good number of years doing things which "apparently" have nothing to do with the eyes. This is so, because medical discipline has recognized that an overall appreciation of body functions are necessary before going in for any specialization. But for the fact that ill-health causes so much personal suffering we may never have witnessed medical student going through two years' study of anatomy!

An organisation is inanimate, it cannot duplicate the immediate and disastrous effects of a coronary attack. Also it is so easy to pass the buck around. However, if ways and means

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could be found to speed up the reaction mechanism of organisations to a point where the effects of its ill-health show up quickly enough, personal accountability is made obvious and that can be an uncomfortable sensation. But only then will matters improve. There is a rider attached to this and that : because the organisation is inanimate and has grown in and "ad hoc" fashion—unlike the well-ordered human system—we have to introduce order (or predictability or less entropy) into it through some effective process of streamlining. And this is a most difficult task as one is up against inertia. No one doing his routine daily chores will accept a new and improved way of doing things unless he understands what it is all about in the first place. Because the job appears, at each level, to be proceeding satisfactorily why should any changes be made at all! This is a vicious circle brought about through misplaced emphasis on details which obscure the objectives of the organisation in a haze of paper and ink and of course, red tape.

## NEW WAY

A question frequently asked, and which I am sure must have burnt many a hole in as many cheeks is : show me how the new way of doing things works. It is very much like a friend who has repeatedly asked me : what small industry requiring limited funds should I go in for so as to make it profitable. My reply has always been, quite obviously you are not prepared, for if you were you would be doing something about it already rather than just asking questions. The moral of the story is you cannot do your homework by proxy and expect to understand what it is all about.

It is necessary to distinguish between the two aspects of a problem : the form and its content. Then only would one take a proper attitude towards the beginning of an objective evaluation. Let me make myself clear by an example or two. Lately we have heard and read a lot of and about manpower planning—quality and quantity-wise. This problem is akin to production and stock control in industry. We purchase raw material (untrained individuals) at a certain price and put it through certain production (training) processes and produce a marketable commodity (fully trained individuals). While planning production we must determine the size and frequency of a lot (the size of a class and how many p.a.) to ensure then we produce an economic batch (training costs being kept at a minimum) size. In order to facilitate production we stock up items required (recurring costs on articles required by trainees) and can either over or under produce in relation to sales (shortage or excess of trained individuals): associated with this are penalties for both shortages (inadequate training manpower) or excess (unemployed trained manpower) production. It also requires certain setting up costs (hostel arrangements etc.) in order to get a production (training programme going..... Or take a person who is going to a post office to buy a stamp or is sitting comfortably on a chair and wishes to dial (per kind favour of the Telephone department) Rawalpindi or ships waiting outside Karachi harbour for a berth. These three instances are forms of a queuing problem. The content of each is of course very very different. The same applies to the personnel training production/stock inventory problem mentioned earlier. However, the same method of attack can be used to get at such problems and it may involve some pretty complicated mathematics, some defying solution except through simulation.

Looking at the above examples we can also observe that the inventory problem could also be a queuing case. Items in stock are idle service facilities (post office counter, telephone lines, berths awaiting to be made use of (ie production). The demands made on the store room are akin to the arrival of a customer (an individual or ship) who must be served. If stock (related directly to the number of stamp selling counters or available telephone lines from Lahore to Rawalpindi or berth in KPT) is inadequate a queue of "unsatisfied" customers is set up.

The contents of no two problems are ever alike, the details of which are normally easily available from the experienced line manager. But there are a restricted number of forms that we come up against. Identifying the form of problems is to find the common thread. This common thread can best be found by taking an overall ie systems view of matters. *This implies recognition of the importance of determining the results of interaction of functional specializations at each level in the hierarchy of an organisation.* Lack of attention of this very important point has come about through default, by insistence on maintaining the traditional way of overseeing the work flow of organisations. A corollary of this state of affairs is that so many individuals are becoming fatalists, in the sense that since their efforts towards improvements come to naught, why do anything about it: in brief maintain the *status quo*. We must accept that as time goes by we are advancing into an era of increasingly complex relationships between man and man, man and State, State and State. We must accept the only constant factor is change, as such we must adapt ourselves to meet the new challenges as they arise. We must accept that we are being given increasingly less time to react to change. We must, therefore, accept the dictates of speed and adjust our sights to the winds of change in order to ensure our reaction is the correct one, so as to produce the maximum beneficial effect. This entails a complete reassessment of our existing systems (which many a time appear to be an end in itself). This can only come about by the realisation that even though our daily work does produce some results (hence we couldn't be that inefficient), you never see the dust under the carpet unless you look for it.

The systems approach to work accomplishment does not eliminate functions such as planning, control, administration....It does, however, alter the emphasis; each function is placed subservient to a very clear definition of objectives and an attempt is made to routinize as much work as possible. The less thinking that can go into work accomplishment the better it is adapted to human non intervention. It makes possible a clear understanding of how the details mesh in with policy ie how execution of work is kept in harmony with the objectives. And it might appear paradoxical to state it does make it possible for those individuals associated with work execution to formulate their own plans, which means greater work satisfaction through greater personal identification with what is going on. Doubtless the transition period between the traditional administrative way of doing things and the new way will bring some discomfort in its train, but then if we are wed to the thesis that the GNP is a measure of progress there is just no other way. The advantage that we have as late-comers is that we can avoid the errors made by the organisations in developed countries in going over to the systems concept of management.

The transition from the traditional organizational workings wherein conflict between administrators on the one hand and professionals/scientists on the other is inevitable will with strong enough direction from those senior enough make for more effective integration of professionals and scientists in organisations, resulting in increased efficiencies. It is not out of place to quote Whitehead".....It is a profoundly erroneous truism, repeated by all copy books and eminent people when they are making speeches, that we should cultivate the habit of thinking of what we are doing. The precise opposite is the case. Civilisation advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking about them. Operations of thought are like cavalry charges in a battle—they are strictly limited in number, they require fresh horses and must only be used in decisive moments".

Smoother and more efficient operations are usually obtained when actions become repetitive, for repetitive action can be clearly defined. It is this definition of detail regarding procedures that lays the foundation of a successful systems approach to work accomplishment. The basis for understanding quickly enough the procedures of an organisation is best done through mapping of flow diagrams—one picture is worth a thousand words. Such flow diagrams (there are about two dozen different ways of doing them!) are in fact models of the work flow process itself. *Managers of today must familiarize themselves with the use of such techniques which enable them to successfully co-ordinate work flow under their control.*

Failures to appreciate the true nature of systems makes it impossible to reap the fruits of economies of size. We want to eat our cake and have it too; we want the efficiencies generated by large scale operations but are not prepared to pay the price for it. The price is involvement of those running organisations at each level, in an educative effort ie to take time off and attempt to distinguish the symptoms of inefficiency from the disease itself. So often we confuse the two. Like any other activity, unless the basis or foundation is understood how can any superstructure based on ignorance get you anywhere? This is also a warning to those who think it is possible to impose new ways of doing things by duplicating successful applications of other organisations or departments (in Pakistan or elsewhere). Work methods differ too much in size, purpose and techniques. Within apparently similar, even rigidly regulated organisations or service utilities their individual problems vary widely enough to preclude unthinking transposition. Successes are not that easily repetitive!

*Unless a concerted effort is made to inculcate an attitude of mind to the making of objective enquiry we can be quite sure that there is going to be an appalling waste of resources all round—of men, money, materials, and management.*

/Large Organisations