Comparing HPCT and social organization

See also *CT Psychology and Social Organization* in
Living Control Systems II.

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

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Subject: Social organization

[From Bill Powers (930524.0800)]   Bob Clark (930523.1610)

> ... isn't it likely that individuals will construct such groups in ways
    that resemble those with which they are already familiar?

This question recurs frequently on the net. It is probably true that people
often attempt to structure social organizations in a way that resembles an
individual's hierarchy of control. A person is used to willing that an act
shall occur (like clenching a fist) and observing its immediate occurrence.
What would be more natural than to set up a social situation so that when one
wills that another person do an act, one immediately perceives that act being
carried out? The idea of managers and executives is patterned this way: the
person higher in the organization issues a command, which the person lower
down must take as a reference signal and bring about in reality. Thus the
manager or executive uses verbal orders, memos, lists of rules on bulletin
boards, etc. as output, to achieve the desired perceptions.

There are, however, some fundamental differences between the way levels of
control are implemented within an individual and the way they have to be
implemented in a social hierarchy.

The communication between levels inside an individual takes place through
upgoing perceptual signals and downgoing reference signals. A higher system's
output is identically a lower system's reference signal (or one contribution
to it). The perceptions in the higher system are derived from direct copies of
perceptions in the lower systems, in the form of neural signals without any
translation being necessary. A control system of one level continuously
adjusts reference signals for the immediately lower level and continuously
receives information about what the lower systems are in fact perceiving.

In a social hierarchy, all communication between levels has to take place
through the lowest level of perception in each person. The executive must
translate the desired perception into symbols and emit them as marks on paper
or sound waves in air. The subordinate then reads or hears those physical
effects, perceives them at many levels, and translates them, probably via
memory associations, into equivalent reference perceptions (memory aside, this
is the basic organization of Martin Taylor's "Layered Protocol" scheme). The
reference perception that results may exist in the subordinate at the same
level as the original one in the executive, or at a higher or a lower level.
The executive may have ordered her secretary to make coffee for a conference;
the secretary may reluctantly have acquiesced, thinking of it as being forced
once again to perform a menial task beneath his capabilities in order to keep
his job. A simple order to perform a sequence of operations is perceived as an
order to play a social role.

The translation problems in a social hierarchy are immense. The order that the
executive perceives as it is given is not necessarily the order that the
subordinate, after translating the words into perceptions, experiences. The
means by which the subordinate starts to implement the understood reference-
perception may itself violate the executive's intention. The subordinate,
having all the internal levels of organization that the executive has, may
disagree with the order and modify it to make it practical, in the
subordinate's opinion. The subordinate may act to achieve one goal, but report
to the executive that something else was done. Language is so ambiguous that
the subordinate may honestly do what was interpreted as the executive's
intent, but actually do something quite different, and provide an honest
verbal report as to what was done that is interpreted by the executive as
indicating compliance.

Because executives do not have direct access to the subordinate's perceptual signals, the executive must operate a great deal of time in the imagination mode. When an order is issued, the executive must imagine how it will be understood and implemented; there is no continuous direct access to what the subordinate is perceiving, a fact which allows great divergences between the actual control process being carried out and the process as the executive imagines it. So executives are forced to make their plans as if their own understanding of what their directives meant had in fact been achieved exactly as intended. This means that elaborate plans are often drawn up and assumed to be implemented, with little relationship to what the subordinates are actually doing -- or what disturbances have arisen since the order was issued, required unexpected actions to counteract them with unforeseen repercussions at the planning level. Executives tend to perceive what they intended to happen, and be out of touch with what is actually happening. Another great difference between the internal hierarchy and the social one is that a given level of control in the internal hierarchy has exclusive domain over a given class of control process, while in a social organization an executive is issuing orders at some highest level, with subordinates providing their own reference signals for their own lower systems from similarly high levels. The result is as though the subordinate, at some level, were receiving and obeying orders not only from the executives of his own organization, but from executives in other organizations, too.

Each person in a social hierarchy has a complete complement of levels. Some of the goals at these levels may have to do with the goals of the organization, but there are many other goals active at the same time. The subordinate may have religious convictions, family and love interests, hobbies and intellectual pastimes, investments, vices, personal ambitions, moral principles of conduct, health concerns, and political opinions. In all of these areas, the person's desires and intentions put constraints on how the processes of control within the person can be used for another's purposes without conflict. The executive drops into the middle of this complex system of goals an arbitrary goal designed to achieve not the subordinate's own goals, but the objectives of the organization as the executive understands them. It is highly likely that the result will be conflict.

This problem does not exist inside a properly functioning individual, for one level of control system has exclusive say as to how that level is going to achieve its goals. One level never questions a reference signal given to it from a higher level; it can't even perceive the world in the same terms as the higher system. It has neither higher nor lower level purposes. The level in a human being that is concerned with syntax knows nothing about words. One level specializes totally in one kind of perception, accepts reference signals from higher systems as givens, and issues reference signals to lower systems with no need to consider that the lower systems may provide their own goals as well. This allows the whole internal human hierarchy to function as a single coordinated unit with no conflict between levels.

So while it may be quite natural for human beings to try to deal with each other as if a social hierarchy were similar to an individual's internal hierarchy, this is basically not a practical mode of social operation, at least not as envisioned in traditional hierarchical terms. Over the last few decades, philosophers of management have begun to realize this, and the traditional "command" structure is being recognized as the cause of more problems than it solves. Hierarchical organizations do not actually work nearly as well as their managers like to pretend. The concepts of HPCT, whether or not they are completely correct about an individual's internal organization, give us strong hints as to why.

Restructuring social organizations in the light of HPCT is not going to be easy. Human beings like to control. They like to control everything they can, including other people. The delusion that this is possible has led people to believe in things like the divine rights of kings, dictators, and priests, the natural superiority of the rich and the unprincipled, the acceptance of class divisions and one's position in society -- the right, in short, of some people to tell others what to want. it is not only those who wield the power who promote this sort of concept; even those over whom the power is wielded have

been persuaded to accept this hierarchical system as the natural order of things.

Perhaps it is the natural order of things, among people who do not yet understand that each person is an autonomous control hierarchy just like every other person. In that case, one primary use of HPCT can be to change the accepted natural order of things.

Best,   Bill P.