

HIERARCHY FROM DEFENSE TO CONNECTION

It appears that our nervous system is hierarchical. However, organizational models adhere to a logic of self-defense and power. That can be overcome.

Marina Capizzi

Hierarchy is the backbone of organizations (public and private companies, (i.e., entities, associations, nonprofit organizations, among other parties.)

We as humans construct hierarchies in order to survive and thrive. As it turns out, hierarchy is also the backbone of our Autonomic Nervous System (ANS). Surprise: hierarchical organizations and our ANS share the same structure. But what is hierarchy? *Hierarchy is a structure that arranges its constituent elements in order of importance.* Organizational hierarchy sub-orders the different levels of decision-making autonomy. Biological hierarchy sub-orders the unconscious behavioral responses that the ANS, moment by moment, deems most appropriate. Exploring the link between biological and organizational hierarchy opens novel perspectives for understanding and intervening to improve organizations.

THE BIOLOGICAL HIERARCHY

Stephen W. Porges, a neuroscientist, found that our ANS is structured hierarchically. The ANS is the part of the nervous system that presides over our vegetative functions (heartbeat, respiration, digestion, etc). The Polyvagal Theory, presented by Porges in 1994, originated in the field of neurology and was later introduced by Deb Dana into clinical practice. The application of the Polyvagal Theory to the or-

ganizational context occurs here for the first time.

The hierarchy Porges discusses is a product of the evolution of our species, wired over millions of years by the continuous interaction between ANS and information from the body (heart, lungs, gut), the environment (sounds, movements, variations), and interaction with others (facial expressions, tone and volume of voice, gestures). Porges describes the hierarchical structure of ANS as a *hierarchy of unconscious but anticipatory behavioral responses* that are intended to manage risk and seek safety. These responses are influenced by prior experiences and thus are not necessarily “objective” because they are activated long before the brain can analyze and make meaning of the experience. The ANS hierarchy consists of 3 levels still present in each of us:

Level 1: ANS appears from 500 million years ago to enable our reptilian ancestors to survive by activating immobilization/isolation responses. We can imagine it as a *brake* activated by the perception of an *inescapable danger to survival* in the face of which we immobilize by isolating ourselves, like a turtle that retreats into its shell. *Level 2:* 400 million years ago, a second hierarchical level is structured in the ANS that produces unconscious defensive responses based on fight or flight responses: think of lions and gazelles. This hierarchical level functions as an *accelerator* and

isactivated when the ANS perceives a *threat to survival* 200,000 years ago, the ANS hierarchy develops a third level that produces much more evolved responses because it does not respond to the survival principle, like the previous two, but to a new principle that emerged precisely with the appearance of mammals: the *biological imperative to connect*. We observe it when people talk to each other, listen to each other, smile at each other, or act together. The highest level of this hierarchy allows us to adapt to all the variations within, outside, and between us because it connects us with our body, the context, and others. Whereas in the defensive mode, we can only pump the brakes or use the accelerator, here we have access to both. Thanks to our accelerator, we can produce the energy required for action and, thanks to the brakes, we can slow down, stop, regenerate energy, listen, reflect, and find tranquility. In this neural state, we have access to the most valuable resources: cognitive, relational, and awareness, our own and that of others. We are in the optimal biological condition to realize our potential, individually and collectively. But how do we humans connect? Our ANSs continuously “talk” to each other. To get out of the defensive mode and access the more evolved bio-hierarchical level, we need to share an experience of sufficient safety with other people: this experience, even if brief, activates co-regulation of the physiological state and generates connection between ANS. Co-regulation is the neurological mechanism underlying the reciprocity of every positive relationship and alliance between individuals, groups, and larger social systems. Only the sharing of mutual moments of safety creates generative bonds between two or more human beings. In contrast, an ANS that is always on defense, that is, that does not share moments of mutual security, cannot achieve the physiological state of security.

The matter is very concrete. It hinges on the level that neural hierarchy changes the physiology of the body, the way we perceive and read reality, and what we can do or not do with others. For example, when we only use the throttle to defend ourselves against a threat (real or not real), the body, its perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and actions are solely aimed at attacking or fleeing from the *enemy*. If our ANS takes the path of attack, we stop listening, raise our tone of voice, interrupt, become authoritarian, press, become biased, we want to assert ourselves and be right, we become fanatical, we accuse others, we go ‘wall-to-wall’, we become territorial, we encroach on

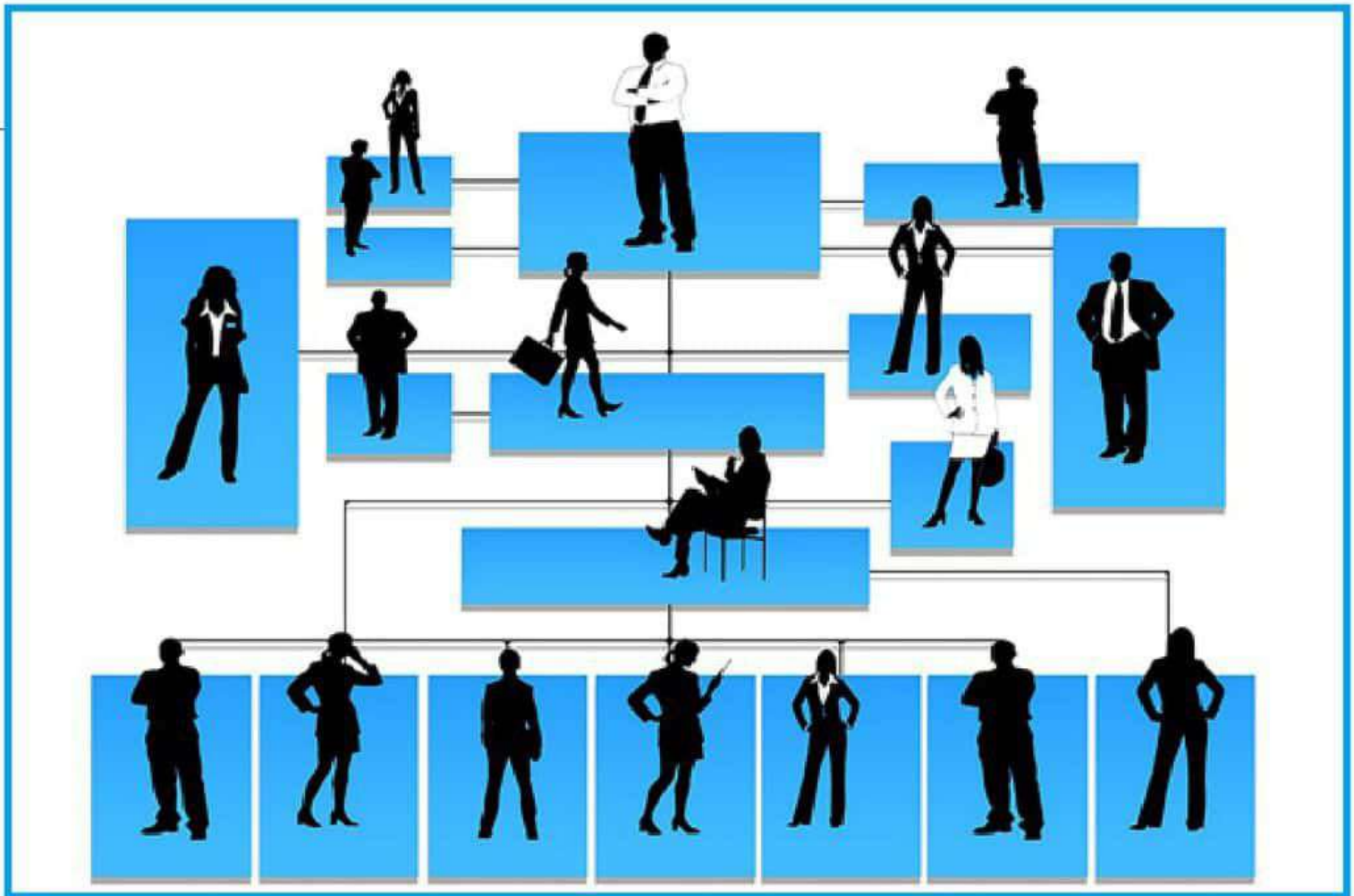
the boundaries of others, we are willing to raise the level of conflict-- *mors tua vita mea*. If our ANS takes the flight route, we shirk our responsibilities, we do not listen, we do not respond, we isolate, we choose reticence, and we do not solve problems. Instead, we become entrenched in procedures, we defend borders, we employ political speak or use language that others don't understand. When defending ourselves from an inescapable danger (again real or not) we only slam on the brakes, we feel trapped with no other options to choose from, we lose hope, our energy tends to diminish, we switch off, we become passive, we feel insignificant and lonely, we can no longer make sense of our actions. All these defensive modes set up automatic behaviors that disconnect us from ourselves and our resources, from the context and its variations, and create barriers between us and others, causing a loss of clarity. When we are hostages to survival, we lose *governance*: we become predictable and repeat the same behaviors for days, months, years, and even centuries. Effectively, we become unconscious puppets of already written biological scripts.

On the contrary, when the shared of experience of mutual security activates connection, we open up, we become capable of approaching others, we talk to each other, we listen to each other, we become flexible, we consider each other's ideas, we think together, we become essentialists and get straight to the point, we gain lucidity and perspective, we are open to change and try new approaches, we create novel solutions and experiment with them, we share skills and abilities by putting them at the service of others because we feel united in a challenge, in a difficulty.

Accordingly, we focus on common goals because we feel we belong to a larger system. We are also able to feel healthy tension, engage in frank and harsh confronta-

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tions, and argue without losing connection. This is the only neural state in which we are well. Porges's research shows that the neural pathways of connection and social engagement are the same ones that preside over our health and well-being. This is why we humans come into the world already hardwired to connect. We want not only to survive but also to thrive. We humans yearn for connection.

From the Polyvagal Theory, then, we learn that the biological hierarchy that structures our ANS can function both as a tool for defense and as a tool for connection and prosperity. Can we say the same about our current organizational hierarchies?

THE ORGANIZATIONAL HIERARCHY

The purpose of organizational hierarchy is to instantiate decision-making autonomy, i.e., power. The *Pyramid* form encapsulates the structure of most organizations: public and private companies, corporations, associations, parties, states, etc. How then, in summary, do hierarchical pyramids work?

Power increases as you go up, that is, the further down you go the fewer decisions get made. At the top, strategic choices, policymaking, investments, etc., are

determined and then implemented down through the chain of command. It applies, in short, the *command-and-control* logic that, beyond declarations and what is written on documents and sites, operates like this:

Those on top tell those below what they describe and control, often paying very little attention to the understanding of who is to perform the dictated task. Thus, the further down one goes, the more one becomes a doer of tasks.

Listening is directed upward because, to remain in the pyramid, it is vital to understand what "the bosses" seek, while it is much less practiced downward to understand the needs and gather proposals and solutions from employees, constituents, and citizens.

Power is considered a scarce and finite resource: important positions decrease as one ascends. So, the higher one climbs, the greater the level of conflict, which increases the need to protect one's power.

Individual goals (e.g., for the individual, function, current, party, state) are valued over common goals.

Obedience and loyalty to the leader in many organizations matter more than competence and results because those at the top value those below (and not vice versa), i.e.: the most important chiefs select the

other leaders.

–There is a stark distance between problems/opportunities and decisions. When solutions are sought out, problems and opportunities begin a long journey to the “correct” destination, like salmon swimming upstream. At the base of the pyramid, people could have solved several of their problems because they live them every day and possess the skills to do so but lack the autonomy to make determinations. This slows down any kind of organization, and creates huge disruptions, malaise, frustration and/or indifference in those who cannot decide, as well as stress and/or indifference in those who are overwhelmed by decisions whose content they do not know. As a result, the overall organization is rendered less effective at fulfilling its purpose.

–Attempts are made to correct the effects of this basic poor approach by adding processes, procedures, rules, and tools that are usually arduous and incomprehensible to most, so bureaucracy grows and malfunction increases.

And we could go on, but there is one more very important point to make. In the pyramid form, everything increases in ascending order. There is only one thing that increases by going down: contact with the organization’s target audience: customers, users, associates, constituents, and citizens, to name a few.

We deal with leadership all the time. There have been courses in business for decades, and thousands of publications analyze leadership style. But the real playing field is drawn by hierarchy, which makes organizations structurally self-centered and unable to connect with their target audience, that is, those who justify their existence. In highly hierarchical companies/entities, the real customer is the boss, not those who buy or benefit from products and services. The “organizational torticollis” that makes people look only upward and to partisan interests also fuels the growing disconnect between parties and voters. In entities and institutions, procedures are more important than users and citizens, so how can this distance shrink? The predominance of special interests over common goals also fuels the dynamics between states that constitute transnational organizations (see Europe). But while there is constant talk of leadership, investment in tools and technologies, ceaseless reorganization, elections, and laws (with great profusion of resources), the basic logic underlying organizational hierarchy remains intact.

Everything changes, yet hierarchy does not. Why

can’t we get past that?

Because organizational hierarchy arose as a social solution to survive. When we appeared on this planet, we were not well placed in the food chain. Left without jaws, claws, or young ones to raise, it took years for humans to become autonomous. In a dangerous world with scarce resources, alone, we would not have made it. To survive, we had to organize together. But being together in a system, as we know, is no simple task. So what then? We relied on our fear as a social glue (we stuck together because we were all afraid) and “invented” a solution that would keep us “bound” through subordination.

Throughout our time on Earth, we have experienced two types of organizational hierarchy: the *relational pyramid* and the *formal pyramid*.

The relational pyramid, in effect for 2.5 million years, allocates all power to a single dominant member: the “alpha male”. The goal in this instance is to keep the social group alive short term as we lived nomadically searching for food as hunters and gatherers. In short, it boils down to obedience in exchange for protection and belonging. By staying within this hierarchy, all members increased their chances of survival.

In the formal pyramid, which came into being about 10,000 years ago, power is attributed to roles and is also exercised indirectly over very large social groups that, over time, have been named, such as in the case of empires, states, cities, and companies. How did we go from power exercised by a single individual to these organizations spread across different latitudes? And how did we hold them together? We did it through the capacity for abstraction, which matured with the *cognitive revolution* (which started about 75,000 years ago) that enabled us to produce images, thoughts, and language: the things that we currently call culture. The cognitive revolution went hand in hand with the invention and spread of agriculture, which fostered the formation of very large resident groups: impossible to keep them together by the direct power of one person. The solution? Handling symbols, and not just matter, we began to attribute power to pure abstractions, entities that are not observable in nature. The process first saw the creation of deities, then castes, rules, and, finally, roles that are sub-ordinate in the organizational chart. Agriculture, which is based on cycles, made it possible to make plans aimed at long-term survival. Allocated power over roles, we have built a *command-and-control*

chain that over the millennia we have enriched with rules, norms, processes, procedures, control tools, and technology.

While the two pyramids represent completely different worlds, there remains a commonality in both: the social cohesion derives from the fear of not surviving and power (a finite resource) decreases going downward and is exercised with the dual purpose of surviving and maintaining control in the short and long term.

FROM HIERARCHIES OF DEFENSE TO HIERARCHIES OF CONNECTION

The current hierarchy of our organizations is an overlay of the two pyramids that come to us from the past and perfectly embodies the first two series of biological hierarchies, the oldest ones. The higher we go up the pyramid, the more power increases and the more defensive (predictable) attack/escape behaviors increase, inside and outside the organization. Everyone (individual, party, ensemble) is focused on their own boundaries and goals, wall-to-wall, looking for culprits, willing to escalate and wage war while accepting destruction as an inevitable side effect: starting with emails and meetings, moving on to declarations, tightening the ranks of corporate functions, currents, parties, breaking rules, and, as we know all too well, escalating to real war between states. Predictable escape behaviors involve shirking responsibilities, defending procedures to the bitter end, not solving problems, as well as procrastinating in decision-making. The further down the pyramid we go, the more power decreases, and so the more defensive (predictable) behaviors that move toward immobilization increase: demotivation, disengagement, passivity, and disinterest.

Our organizational hierarchies are hierarchies of defense, where we have learned to use power only because of fear. Of course, organizational life is not reduced exclusively to “defense”, especially when we step out of our role (where, as it happens, hierarchy succeeds) and relate as people.

It is plainly visible, for all to see, that the current organizational hierarchy, which until now has allowed us to survive, is no longer the proper tool to defend ourselves, and even less so to thrive. People need each other, companies need the trust of customers and their communities, institutions need users, parties need voters, states need citizens who feel at home, and the world needs mutual security.

However, the organizational hierarchy of defense is structured towards closure and not towards aperture, nor dialogue and engagement because it is based on the unconscious and predictable behaviors that our biological hierarchy activates when it is in a neural state of defense.

Instead, our biological hierarchy is more evolved than our organizational hierarchy because, in addition to functioning as a hierarchy of defense, it can also operate as a hierarchy of connection. When we enter the domain of connection, power becomes an infinite resource because it serves to foster experiences of mutual security at all levels, with the purpose of creating generative bonds. Our biological hierarchy of connection has continued to operate since we appeared on this planet because only without attack/escape and isolation would we have faced extinction. We have found ways, even in the midst of war and destruction, to forge bonds, raise our children, and care for the elderly. We have also created local, national, and supra-national organizations that cultivate the principle of connection more than the principle of survival. This is true. The organizational hierarchy of connection has never become the predominant organizational hierarchy. However, in the millions of years on earth, humans have never wielded such powerful and fast tools of destruction, nor has there ever been such a deep and widespread need for well-being and prosperity.

Up until now, we have relied on defense hierarchies for survival, but there exists another option. We can consciously choose to cultivate in every organization hierarchies of connection to foster individual and collective well-being. Beginning with our behaviors, how we relate, and how we foster experiences of mutual safety as individuals, citizens, professionals, managers, politicians, government, and state leaders, among others. Our organizations are made up of bodies. Bodies are capable of connecting. Keeping this bodily truth in mind, the hierarchy of connection is in a certain sense already ours. ■

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