

# Levels of Bureaucracy

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## Does bureaucracy have a function?

People in organizations constantly report their frustration with the bureaucracy. There is a fantasy that if we could just get rid of bureaucracy and hierarchy we could finally get something done. The real problem is that people don't know what bureaucracy is for, and see it as a left over vestige of an authoritarian past.

While levels in organizations are generally seen as pointing out who gets to tell who what to do, there is some evidence that each level actually specializes in a different type of thinking, just as different departments specialize in thinking about different things. If this is true, managers must be careful about which level makes which decisions.

In the book *A general theory of bureaucracy*, Elliott Jaques discusses his intensive research into military, government and industrial organizations which found differences in the planning horizon and the types of thinking used at each level. (Summarized in the table below.) While some organizations may have more than one level of managers in one of these levels, they do seem to

describe some of the differences in the ways different levels think.

## Meaning of Levels

These levels can be seen both as developmental levels for people and as descriptions of certain kinds of jobs. Over a lifetime, a person moves from level I up. Some people rise more quickly than others, some people plateau out at a final level before others do. Part of management is to match the level of the manager with the level of the position, either by selecting people at the right level, or by helping those in a position to shift the focus of their thinking to the next level.

## Planning Horizon

This time span is the amount of time you might expect someone to act without input from a higher level. It is the amount of time it takes for results to come from actions at that level. For example, a machinist can immediately see how a part matches specification, but a corporate

LVL	PLANNING HORIZON	TYPE OF THINKING	EXAMPLE
VI	10 - 20 yrs	Institution Creating	Corporate/Group
V	5 - 10 yrs	Intuitive Theory	Division
IV	2 - 5 yrs	Conceptual Modeling	Function
III	1 - 2 yrs	Imaginal Scanning	Department
II	3 mo - 1 yr	Imaginal Concrete	Supervisory
I	0 - 3 mo	Perceptual-Motor Concrete	Shop or clerical floor

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president might have to wait 10 years to see how a new business is going to work out.

## Thinking Style

It is important to note that the type of thinking listed is the predominant activity, not the only activity. For example, a highly qualified technician may be operating at a level III, while also performing tasks such as taking a wrench and opening up a machine which are normally a Level I task. Using a pencil and paper is level I but a level VI executive will still use it, but to develop ideas about level VI issues.

## CONCRETE LEVELS

The first three levels are more concrete, dealing with tasks and changes you can directly perceive.

### *I Perceptual-Motor Concrete*

0 - 3 mo/Shop or clerical floor

At this level, people work with physical things in physical ways, pushing buttons, moving parts, cutting metal, typing documents, filing papers, etc. People are either told what to do and how to do it by a supervisor, or they follow a prescribed set of procedures.

### *II Imaginal Concrete*

3 mo - 1 yr/Supervisory

At this level, problem solving and imagination are used to achieve goals. The task can be imagined in concrete terms, but the manager must take a general goal and turn it into concrete plans which can be followed by those at level I. Those who can imagine a job done well and develop a good plan for a particular situation function well at this level.

### *III Imaginal Scanning*

1 - 2 yrs/Department

At this level, an individual supervises more tasks than can be held in the brain at once or more job sites than can be observed at once. But those who work at this level function by scanning from one task to another, such as reviewing all the projects a department is handling, one at a time, or discussing each customer relationship, one at a

time. This level can make connections between parts of projects, such as conflicts or opportunities, but has not yet begun making useful generalizations about the areas being managed.

## ABSTRACT LEVELS

The second three levels are more abstract, dealing with tasks and changes you cannot directly perceive.

### *IV Conceptual Modeling*

2 - 5 yrs/Function

This is the level of design in which methods, procedures, and designs are developed based on older designs and well proven principles. At this level an individual must maintain mental contact with what exists, but at the same time to achieve a detachment which allows one to imagine things which are different from what already exists. At this level, neither the output nor the project can be foreseen in concrete terms, even by imaginal scanning. Only as one proceeds through the project can the project be planned in detail.

### *V Intuitive Theory*

5 - 10 yrs/Division

Individuals at this level are occupied in fashioning the longer term future while subordinates at lower levels manage in accord with policies and plans already laid down. At this level, managers rely on intuitive theories about how companies and markets work, theories developed over years of practical experience. By using the integrative power of intuition, the manager can make decisions which optimize the ability of the company to adapt to the constantly shifting world.

### *VI Institution Creating*

10 - 20 yrs/Corporate/Group

At this level an manager counts on general managers to manage their business, while thinking about what new businesses the organization might enter and developing new organizational structures to get the business. Such a manager might invent a whole new way of delivering a service or

product, requiring a whole new way of structuring a market.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS**

There are several lessons managers can take from this model of organizations:

When people are promoted to a level beyond their development, they try to solve problems with the thinking that helped them at lower levels. When they are employed below their level of development, they have ideas expected from upper levels, ideas which are labeled "creativity".

### **Role of your level**

If each level of the organization specializes in a certain type of thinking, then each level has a specialized contribution to make, in the same way as the different functions such as engineering, marketing, manufacturing, etc. If you make the decisions which properly belong to your subordinates who specialize in that kind of thinking, not only are you wasting time you should be spending on your level of tasks, you are stealing some of the dignity and fun of your subordinates job.

This does not mean that you should not be guiding your subordinates in their ability to work in that level, or that you should not be contributing ideas and insights. But if you never let a child walk on their own, how will they ever learn to walk? And until they master walking, can they progress to running?

### **Using the wrong level of thinking**

Managers succeed by excelling at their level, so they are promoted to the next level which requires a different kind of thinking. A level I person who is promoted for doing a job well, who cannot perform a level II task of problem solving and explaining the new plan to another, may "fake it" by just doing it himself or herself. A level IV manager may stick to level III thinking, managing others to handle each task just the way he or she was taught, instead of designing a new, more effective approach.

## **Listening to other levels**

Most people in organizations have had the experience where an upper level manager makes a poor decision based on past experience, rather than listening to the subordinates who know the current situation and the state of the art if the technology. In the same way that accounting cannot tell engineering how to design and design cannot tell accounting how to file taxes, the authority of levels is misused when the specialists in the levels are not allowed the final say.

## **Co-creating across levels**

If we learn to see various levels as specialists in their kind of thinking, we can see that in the same way that multi-functional teams can invent powerful new alternatives through their synergy, we can expect similar results from cross level teams. Of course, multi-level teams can run into a lot of confusion from those same differences in perspective, but strong, well prepared facilitation and a strong desire to co-create together can reap the rewards.

## **References**

Jaques, Elliott. *A general theory of bureaucracy*. Heinemann Educational Books: Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 1976.