

ONLINE COUNTERPOINT 3.7

When considering the different forms of structure examined in the chapter, ask yourself the question: To what extent is a design favoured because it is most efficient or most effective, and to what extent is it preferred because it is politically expedient? Of course, a new design is invariably justified in terms of its anticipated contribution to improved organizational performance. But is the existence and retention of hierarchical control, for example, really adequately explained in terms of anticipated technical improvements? Is hierarchical structure not also established and retained, and perhaps primarily, in order to secure (political) control? By 'political' is meant control to maintain a structure of domination of most benefit, symbolically as well as materially, to established elites rather than for purposes of universal improvement. In other words, control is not for greater cost-effectiveness per se. Rather, top managers, acting on behalf of shareholders, favour forms of 'structure' that consolidate and legitimize their monopoly of decision-making, their comparative material advantage and their elevated status.

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When assessing what combination of control and collaboration is 'best' it is likely that executives will also consider which combination is most attractive, or comfortable, for them. So, in addition to considerations of efficiency and effectiveness, there are other issues at stake – not least the jockeying for, and consolidation of, positions by executives. What implications do alternative strategies have for their career prospects? Do proposed changes fit well with their own managerial styles?

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The 'win-win' scenario is an appealing one but it can also be misleading. An initial honeymoon period may be enjoyed, when more responsibility and collaboration is experienced as release from routine, degradation and division. But as the new set of structures and relationships become established and entrenched, awareness of the greater work intensity, mutual surveillance and stress associated with teamwork may become more evident, resulting in disillusionment, resentment and passivity. This is especially likely when the development of a team is not an organic, horizontal process but, rather, imposed or 'manufactured' from above.

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Some management experts argue that the matrix organizational structure is inappropriate in most circumstances, because of a lack of clarity of functions and lines of responsibility, and the likelihood of conflict over authority. Bartlett and Ghoshal claim that most companies that have adopted the matrix have eventually abandoned it. They argue that, while the idea of expanding cross-organizational communication is key to success, this is best achieved through creating a culture receptive to multi-directional organizational flows rather than depending on the potentially unwieldy matrix structure to deliver that communication. The basic point is that the ends of encouraging and facilitating open and direct horizontal communication is not necessarily achieved through the means of structural design.

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Whether those customer who, at the time, believed themselves to have obtained a mortgage so quickly, with the minimum of red tape, subsequently wished that the process had been more discriminating and less driven by performance measures and commissions, is another question.

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Engendering such a culture may be the intention but there is a danger here of confusing aspiration with delivery. Although an effective horizontal structure is likely to require a culture of openness, trust, etc., it is not so easy to develop. For example, 'the freedom to think creatively' is likely to be restricted when it comes to challenging established authority or suggesting that a business could be run along very different lines. In effect, 'openness', 'freedom' and 'responsibility' tend to be narrowly interpreted and prescribed within an established, corporate set of values and priorities. This is not to deny that work can be designed to improve employee involvement and satisfaction as well as provide an improved service to customers. But it is important not to exaggerate the extent to which employees are 'empowered', can think freely or are able to respond flexibly.