> *I used to be hard on myself because I was working in groups that didn't have their shit together as far as structure goes. We were always veering off into inefficiency and lack of accountability, or else we got into hyperefficiency and people would do power tripping and it wasn't fun any more. Even at our best times when we were doing really good work, we still didn't live up to my ideals of how a group should be.*
>
> *Then I read more about the patriarchy and realized that we've been under its grip for thousands of years, and that there is an alternative way of working that has an even longer history but that we lost touch with. And that we've recently been working our way back to partnership but we have this heavy, heavy drag of inherited patterns of domination slowing us down.*
>
> *So now in working with activists I cut us a break and realize the best we can do is experiment, and find out what works by trying new things that start to reflect our values and still draw on the lessons we and others have learned. I'm much less harsh now, and more interested in imagination instead of judgement.*
>
> —veteran East Coast organizer who has worked on the neighborhood, city, and state levels

Invent the Structure that Fits Your Mission, Values, and People

Organizational structures run the gamut from a hierarchy to a collective. In a hierarchy, decisions are passed down through successive levels for implementation. In a collective, decisions are made by the people who will implement them. Most activists value equality and individualism, but often don't know how to use their values to build an organization. There's a lot to consider: the mission to be accomplished, the resources available (both people and finances), the outside environment (including forms of opposition), and the culture or cultures represented by the core activists and the constituency.

More and more organizations these days are structural hybrids. Hierarchies are making use of collective structures such as teams, and organizations that started out as informal collectives are incorporating, establishing boards of directors, and looking more like a flat hierarchy. The environment in which all organizations are operating is changing rapidly. Flexibility and adaptation is necessary

for survival. The structure that served well in an earlier stage of a group's life may become counterproductive in a later stage. When an organization is developing a long-range plan for its work, it might consider whether its present structure needs to be clarified or changed in view of new demands or changes in its mission.

> *When I joined the staff of a rape crisis center I found a collective structure which came out of the feminist spirit of equality in the women's movement. There was a board elected by the volunteers, but much uncertainty between board and staff about their responsibilities. The board was very involved in day-to-day operations because, as volunteers, board members were active in all program areas; at the same time, the staff director reported to the board.*
>
> *At the time I came on staff the center got a large government grant, but this only lasted a couple of years which meant that we had to diversify our funding. That decision, in turn, meant that we needed to describe our organizational structure to potential funders.*
>
> *The traditional hierarchical chart was inappropriate to our ideals and to our reality. Instead, we made a chart with a small circle in the center, representing the board, surrounded by a bigger circle representing the staff. From the center there were lines going out, like spokes of a wheel. At the end of the spokes were circles representing the programs, which were operated by volunteers with staff acting as coordinators. The fact that the line went from each program circle to the center showed that volunteers from each program sat on the board. Because each line went through the staff circle, we could see that staff was connected up. It felt great to create a chart that showed our special structure, and it was useful for our members to have a better understanding of how the organization was put together.*
>
> —former director of the agency, which was one of the largest rape crisis centers in North America

Here is an overall perspective to keep in mind when inventing structures: most people do a better job when they get more satisfaction from their work. They get more satisfaction when they see how their own efforts connect with the work of others, when they have input in

decision-making, and when they have some control over their work. Both the individual and the organization benefit from clarity about accountability and responsibility.[2]

An organizational chart is a graphic display of an organization's accountability structure. Let us consider some of the possible structures.[3]

Traditional Hierarchy

A pyramid is the traditional shape of a hierarchy. The more levels there are between the top and bottom, the steeper the hierarchy. When there are only two or three levels in the pyramid, it is a flat hierarchy. Decisions are made at the level above where they are implemented. The higher up the pyramid a decision is made, the more impact it presumably will have on the work of the whole organization. People on a lower level may be asked for information needed for decisions made higher up, but they do not participate in making the decisions.
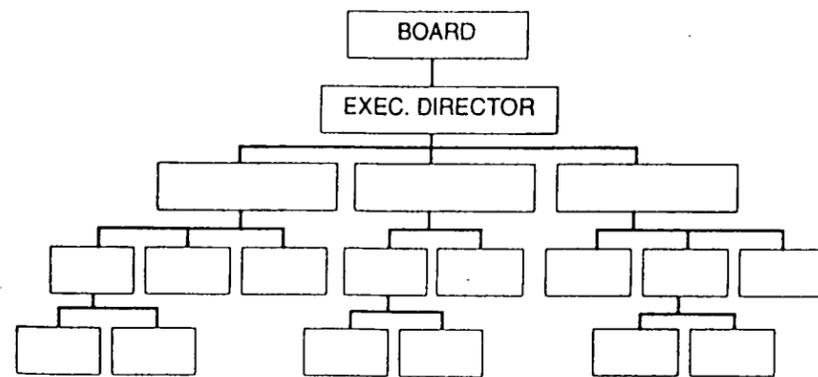

TRADITIONAL HIERARCHY

It appears to be a simple and rational structure. It clearly spells out who is accountable to whom. It does have limitations. Since information has to travel up the pyramid before decisions can be passed down, it slows down an organization's ability to respond to quickly changing demands and opportunities. Also, it rarely fosters individual creativity and cooperation between different parts of the organization.[4]
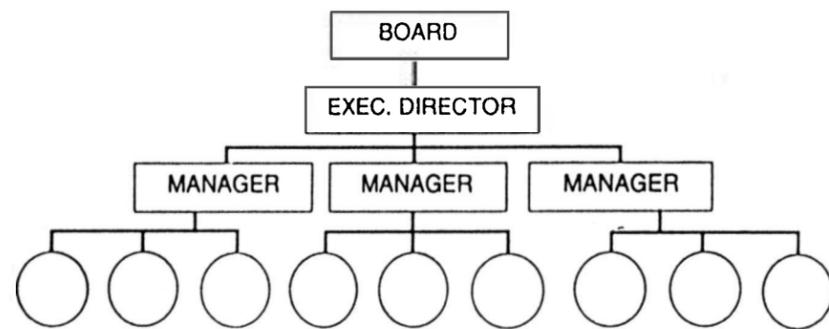
Teams

One way to combine the needs for participation and accountability is to substitute teams for the usual multilevel management/worker structure. Members of a team depend on each other for accomplishing the team's tasks. Team members may have different skills and levels of experience, but everyone's participation is necessary for the job to be done. They are interdependent. This means there needs to be some overlap of skills and knowledge, so team members can cover for each other in times of emergency. Teams may be true collectives, where everyone participates in making decisions, or they may have a leader who makes certain kinds of decisions and represents the team in relations with the larger organizational structure. Being a team, however, implies participants having input, at least, into decisions at the team level.[5]

Teams can be used at all levels, including with top management. Having a management team accountable to the board instead of an executive director avoids the problems connected with all responsibility resting in one person, and can add both stability and depth to the organization's leadership. One person may serve as team leader, specifically thinking about the functioning of the team as such and not just about organizational decisions that must be made. A management team requires clear expectations about the functioning of the team and the board's responsibilities if serious conflicts arise among members of the management team.

Most organizations need structures that allow them to respond flexibly as conditions change. A metropolitan organization serving children and youth faced declining participation by both children and adult volunteers, and had attracted few people of color. To stem the membership decline and rectify the racial imbalance, it created multifunctional teams. Each team became responsible for programs in a number of geographic areas bridging different racial groups. Individuals continue to do "their job," but now in the context of team planning. Team leaders think about the team as a whole, participate in the work and meet periodically to share ideas and experiences and connect their teams with the wider organization. This formerly traditional organization now has teams below the executive director.
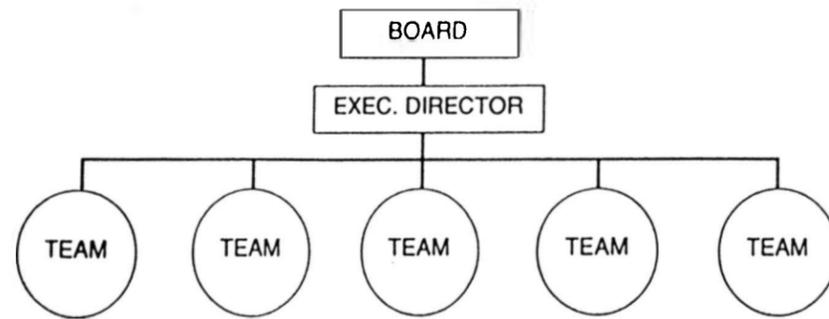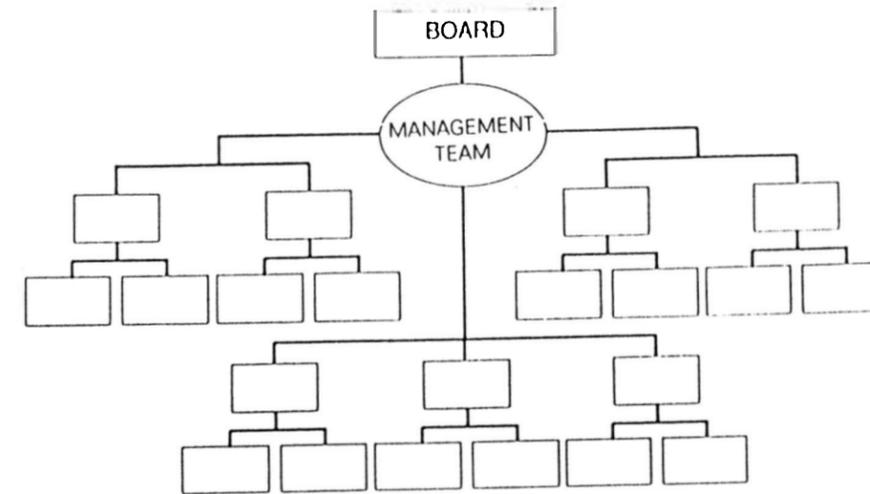
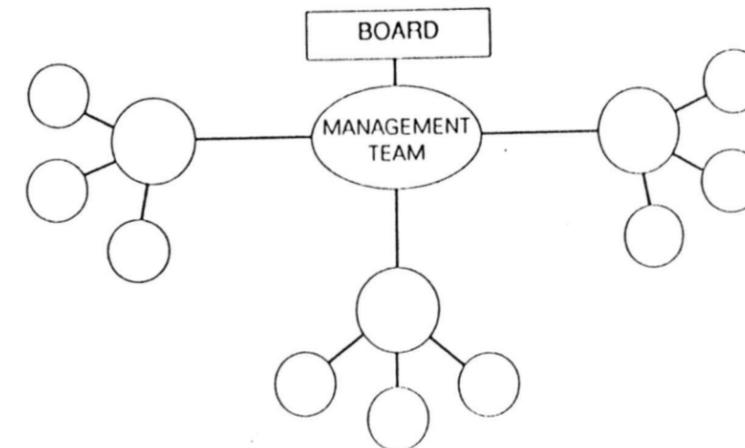**TEAMS BELOW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

PROGRAM TEAMS

TEAMS BELOW MANAGERS

In another modified hierarchical model the board of directors sets organizational policy, hires the executive director, and assesses how well the mission is being accomplished; the executive operates through a small group of managers, each of whom coordinates the work of a number of teams.

In some models the executive director has been replaced by a management team. Each team member directs, manages, or coordinates an area of the organization's work. There may be a traditional hierarchy below the management team, or the team form may pervade the organization.
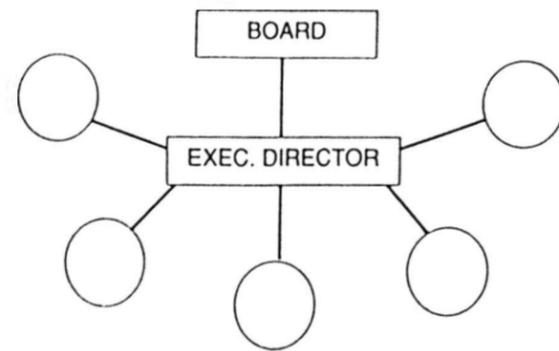

**MANAGEMENT TEAM WITH TRADITIONAL HIERARCHY BELOW**

MANAGEMENT TEAM WITH TEAMS BELOW

In a flat hierarchy the board may act through an executive director, who implements the organization's programs through an administrative team and a number of self-directed program teams (or in small organizations, individual program staff members).

72

73

FLAT HIERARCHY

In a council model, representatives from each program team serve on the board of directors. The executive director is charged with administrative functions, including the hiring and firing of staff, and the coordination of the organization's program, which is carried out by self-directed teams.
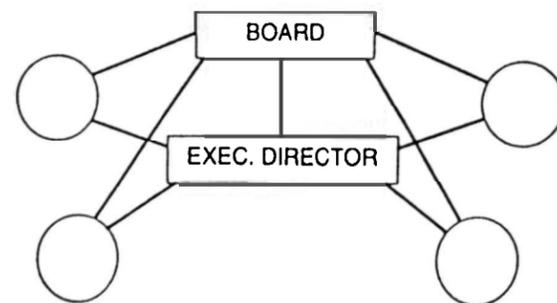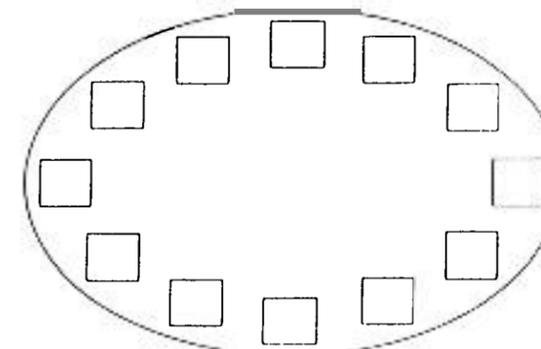

COUNCIL

Nonhierarchical Structures

If the people who make decisions are also responsible for carrying them out, there is no hierarchy. No one is above anyone else. In an organization with more than a handful of members, this does not necessarily mean that everybody is involved in every decision or that skills and experience are the same for everyone.[6]

Many people who were part of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s wanted to throw off the dominating shackles of patriarchal structures and, therefore, rejected leadership roles. What they found, as sociologist Jo Freeman pointed out in her landmark article "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," was that both leadership and sustained patterns (structures) developed anyway, as underground phenomena.[7] The informal structure—because it was not acknowledged—was unaccountable, and in that sense highly undemocratic. A democratic collective is one where the members are aware of group process and power dynamics and are willing to work through conflicts together to maintain productivity and accountability

In a simple collective, each member is a partner to the decisions made by the group and carries equal responsibility with the others for the mission and conduct of the organization. One person may be assigned the role of facilitator, or in Robert Greenleaf's term, the "first among equals."[8] This role may also rotate among the members.

COLLECTIVE