The Basic Concepts and Principles of Unity of Command and the Span of Control

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ABSTRACT: *The two basic principles of unity of command and span of control are centrally indispensable to the study of organizational theory and practice in particular, and in general terms, to successful, efficient and smooth public administration practice in both developed and developing societies. These two basic concepts and principles constitute the subject matter of this article.*

Keywords: *unity of command, span of control, basic concepts and principles, organizational theory and practice, central and indispensable.*

I. Introduction

In the study of organizational theory and practice, a primary element of public administration, the basic concepts and principles of unity of command and span of control are both central and indispensable to successful public administration practice in any country, both developed and developing countries. The two concepts and principles constitute the main foci in this article

II. Purpose Of The Article

To **define, explain**and **demonstrate** the roles played by the two basic concepts and principles of unity of command and span of control in organizations

III. Unity Of Command And Span Of Control

The two basic concepts and principles of unity of command and span of control will be looked at separately in this article because of their distinct roles in the study of organizational theory and practice. They are treated as follows:

3.1. Unity of command
3.1.1. Meanings

Unity of command means that an employee should receive orders from one superior only. In other words, it means that no employee should be subjected to the order of more than one superior. Thus, it stands for single boss for each person or mono-command.

3.1.2. Definitions

Henry Fayol: "For action whatsoever, an employee should receive orders from one superior only."

Pfiffner and **Presthus**: "The concept of unity of command requires that every member of an organisation should report to one, and only one leader."

Dimock and **Dimock**: "A corollary of the chain of command is unity of command, the principle that each employee should have only one boss."

William Fox and Ivan H. Meyer: "Unity of command means organizational principle that each person within the line of authority should be responsible to only other person. An employee who is responsible to various persons in authority will presumably be confused, ineffective and irresponsible, while an employee receiving commands from one supervisor is presumably methodical, efficient and responsible. It is a central idea in Luther Gulick's organization theory, which refers to subordinates and not to those issuing commands.

3.1.3.Arguments for the unity of command

The observance of the concept of unity of command is essential to avoid confusion and manipulation in organisations. Duality or multiplicity of command keeps an employee under confusion and conflicting situation, for instance, "whom' to follow and 'what' to follow. Further, a subordinate can also evade orders by playing-off one superior against another, which undermines the organizational purpose.

Henry Fayol is the most important advocate of the principle of unity of command. He asserted that, "should it be violated, authority is undermined, discipline is in jeopardy, order disturbed and stability threatened… As soon as two superiors wield their authority over the same person or department, uneasiness makes itself felt and should the cause persist, the disorder increases, the malady takes on the appearance of an organisation troubled by a foreign body, and the following consequences are to be observed: either the dual command ends in disappearance or elimination of one of the superiors and organic well-being is restored, or else the organism continues to wither away. In no case is there adaptation of the social organism to dual command.

According to **Fayol**, the following factors result in dual command.

* Dividing up authority between two members
* Imperfect demarcation of departments
* Constant linking up, as between different departments natural intermeshing of functions and duties often badly defined.

Gulick and Urwick have also supported the principle of unity of command. They believed that, " a man cannot serve two masters." Hence, they concluded that, "well-managed administrative units in the government are almost without exception headed by single administrators."

Gulick explains the importance of this principle, "any rigid adherence to the principle of unity of command may have its absurdities. But they are unimportant in comparison to the certainty of confusion, inefficiency and irresponsibility which arise from the violation of the principle."

3.1.4. Arguments against the unity of command

The concept of unity of command has been opposed by many writers. Seckler-Hudson argues, "the old concept of one single boss for each person is seldom found in fact in complex governmental situations. Many interrelationships exist outside the straight line of command which require working with, and reporting to many persons for purposes of orderly and effective performance….the administrator in government has many bosses and he can neglect one of them. From one he may receive policy orders; from another, personnel; from a third, budget; from a fourth, supplies and equipments."

J.D. Millet advocates the theory of 'Dual Supervision' in place of unity of command. He argues that the concept of unity of command needs to be reconciled with the recognition that supervision of any activity may be dual – technical (professional) and administrative. These two types of supervision may be exercised by different individuals. The former may be concerned with the professional competence in the performance of a job, while, the latter may be chiefly interested in the efficient utilization of men and material resources available for the job. He concludes that "it should be kept in mind that under no circumstances an employee is subject to conflicting commands.

According to Herbert Simon, the principle of unity of command conflicts with the principle of specialization. He says, "One of the most important uses to which authority is put in an organisation is to bring about specialization in the work of making decisions, so that each decision is made at the point in the organisation where it can be made most expertly. If an accountant in a school department is subordinate to an educator, then the finance department cannot issue direct orders to him regarding the technical accounting aspects of his work. Similarly, the director of motor vehicles in the public works department will be unable to issue direct orders on care of motor equipment to the fire-truck driver." He continues: "The principle of unity of command is perhaps more defensible if narrowed down to the following: In case two authoritative commands conflict, there should be a single determinate person whom the subordinate is expected to obey, and the sanctions of authority should be applied against the subordinate only to enforce his obedience to that one person."

F.W. Taylor has also rejected the principle of unity of command. In its place, he advocated the concept of "functional foremanship', under which a worker receives orders from eight supervisors, or functional foremen. This ensures specialization and expert supervision.

3.1.5. Factors affecting unity of command

Moreover, the concept of unity of command has been affected by the following two factors which are the result of growing size and complexity of modern organisations.

(i) Adoption of plural headed bodies like 'boards' and 'commissions' as the heads of administrative agencies as against 'bureaus' (headed by a single individual).
(ii) Increasing number and growing influence and power of staff and auxiliary agencies which are manned by specialists.

3.1.6. Two Varied Interpretations of unity of command

In addition to the above, the concept of unity of command is also interpreted in two other ways:

* It means that all the units of an organisation should be integrated or brought under the authority of one head like a President, Cabinet, a Minister, a Secretary, a Chairman or some other body or officer.

- It means that the head of the organisation should be a single individual. More elaborately it means that there should be only one person and not a body of persons at the apex of an organisation, and all lines of authority should be concentrated in his hand.

In the first sense, unity of command is incompatible with the independent or autonomous units of organisations like the public corporations or constitutional bodies in India or the independent regulatory commissions in USA and so on. In the second sense, it is incompatible with Commission type or Board type of organisations like the Election Commission, the Union Public Service Commission, the University Grants Commission, the Railway Board, the Flood Control Board and so on. Hence, the most widely accepted interpretation of unity of command is the one given above.

3.2. Span of Control
3.2.1. Meaning
The principle of span of control means the number of subordinates or the units of work that an officer can personally direct, control, and supervise. It is also known as 'span of supervision' or 'span of management.' According to Dimock and Dimock, "The span of control is the number and range of direct, habitual communication contacts between the chief executive of an enterprise and his principal fellow officers."

3.2.2. Definition
According to Fox and Meyer, (1995), p121, by span of control, it is meant that one of the earlier principles of administration which states that there is an upper limit to the number of subordinates any administrator can directly supervise, generally set at 12, and advises administrators to eliminate any violations of this principle by reducing the number of officials reporting to them by either emerging certain offices or stretching out the scalar chain."

3.2.3. Relationship with Hierarchy
There is a close relationship between hierarchy and span of control. That is, the number of levels in a hierarchical (scalar) organisation depends upon the span of control of a superior officer. Narrow (smaller) span of control increases the number of levels in the organisation and thereby creates tall structure. On the other hand, wide (larger) span of control decreases their number and thereby results in a flat structure.

3.2.4 Views on Limit
The principle of span of control in public administration is related to the concept of 'span of attention described in psychology by V.A. Graicunus, the French management consultant. This concept says that there is a limit to the number of things one can attend to at the same time. In other words, the span of attention of a human being is limited as there are limits to the range of human capacity and attention. Thus, it follows that there is a limit to the span of control which is nothing but the span of attention applied to the job of supervision of subordinates by the superior.

However, the opinions of various writers differ on the exact limit of span of control.
- Sir Ian Hamilton felt that a supervisor could supervise 3 to 4 subordinates.
- V.A. Graicunus found that a superior can supervise the work of 4 to 5 subordinate directly.
- LyndallUrwick believes that a supervisor directly 5 to 6 subordinates at the higher levels, whereas, the span of control varies from 8 to 12 at the lower levels, where the work is more simple and routine.
- Lord Haldane and Graham Wallas felt that a chief executive could supervise 10 to 12 subordinates without being overburdened.
- American Management Association stated that a superior could supervise 9 subordinates.

According to V.A. Graicunus, while the number of subordinates reporting directly to an executive increases arithmetically, the number of potential relationships increases geometrically. This is because supervision is not limited to individual subordinates, but also includes the numerous permutations and combinations of their mutual relationships. The total number of all relationships to be supervised would be – direct single + crosses + direct group. His theory can be mathematically expressed as $n(2n/2 + n - 1)$, where n stands for the number of subordinates reporting directly to the supervisor.

Though, there exists no unanimity over laying down a definite number constituting the span of control, there is a general agreement among writers on administration that shorter the span, the greater will be the superior-subordinate contact and in consequence, more effective control, supervision, and direction. However, Seckler-Hudson views differently. He says, "There are dangers inherent in excessively limited span of control, such as, the risk of detailed supervision of the subordinates and the resultant failure to stimulate them or to fully use their capacities. It is possible also that short span of control means long chain of commands."

3.2.5. Factors determining span of control
The exact length of span of control depends on the following variable factors.

Function:
It refers to the type/nature of work to be supervised. The span of control is more when the work to be supervised is of easy, routine, mechanical, and homogeneous character than when the work is difficult, non-routine, intellectual, and heterogeneous character. In this context, Luther Gulick observed that a chief of public works can deal effectively with more direct subordinates than any Army General because all of his immediate subordinates in the department of public works will be in the general field of engineering while in the army there will be many different elements such as communications, chemistry, and so on.

Time:
It refers to the age of the organisation concerned. The span of control is more in old organisations than in newer organisations. This is because, in older organisations, things get stabilized, while newer organisations will have few precedents.

Space:
It refers to the place of work to be supervised. The span of control is more when the supervisor and the subordinates to be supervised are under the same roof, than when the subordinates work in different rooms or at a distance from the supervisor. In this context, LyndallUrwick made a distinction between 'direct supervision' and 'access' to the boss, implying that while a supervisor can directly supervise only a few subordinates, he can introduce some flexibility in the organisation by allowing more subordinates to have access to him.

3.2.6. Personality:
It refers to the competence of the supervisor and the supervised. The personality: It refers to the competence is more when the supervisor is intelligent, energetic and tactful than when he is weak, dull and incompetent. Similarly, the personality: It refers to the competence is more when the subordinates are trained and experienced than when they are untrained and incompetent.
In addition to the above, the span of control also depends on the following factors.
1) Delegation of authority
2) Traditions and environments of the organisation
3) Techniques of supervision
According to the Report of Committee on Administration (1972), the span of control is larger in the following cases.
1) Energetic, skilled, intelligent, and competent superior
2) Competent, well-trained, and experienced subordinates
3) If the work is routine, repetitive, measurable, and homogeneous
4) Well-planned work
5) Utilizing the staff assistance
6) Use of various effective communications
7) Employees working under a single roof.

3.2.7. Idea Under Revision
The whole idea of span of control has changed in the recent times due to the following factors.
- The increasing use of automation and mechanization in administration
- The information revolution due to management information system (MIS)
- The increasing number and growing role of the specialists, technicians and professionals in the civil service.

IV. Summary Of Principles Of Unity Of Command And Span Of Control
The two principles, namely, unity of command and span of control, are central and indispensable to the study of organizational theory and practice in particular, and in general to successful, effective and efficient public administration practices in both developed and developing societies.

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