GENERAL

mary parker follett theory of management

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Introduction

In the evolving landscape of organizational theory, one name that continues to resonate is **Mary Parker Follett**. Though her work dates back to the early 20th century, the principles she championed—shared power, collaborative problem solving, and the integration of individual and collective goals—remain profoundly relevant for today's managers. This article delves into the **Mary Parker Follett theory of management**, exploring its core concepts, historical roots, practical applications, and lasting impact on modern leadership practices. Whether you are a seasoned executive, a budding manager, or an academic studying management theory, understanding Follett's insights can enrich your approach to leading people and driving organizational success.

Who Was Mary Parker Follett?

Mary Parker Follett (1868 1933) was an American social worker, management consultant, and pioneer in organizational theory. Born in Boston, she studied at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and later taught at Wellesley College. Her career spanned academia, social reform, and practical consulting, where she collaborated with industrial giants like General Electric and the United States Army. Follett's work challenged prevailing notions of hierarchical control, advocating instead for a more fluid, participatory approach to management.

Key Milestones in Follett's Career

- Graduated from MIT with a degree in mechanical engineering—uncommon for women of her era.
- Published The New State (1920), outlining her vision for democratic governance and organizational structure.
- Authored Dynamic Administration (1924), a foundational text that introduced many of her management concepts.
- Consulted for Fortune 500 companies, applying her theories to real world business challenges.
- Advocated for women's rights and social justice, linking organizational health with societal well being.

Historical Context: The Birth of a New Management Paradigm

During the early 1900s, management theories were dominated by scientific management (Frederick Taylor) and classical organizational structures (Henri Fayol). These models emphasized efficiency, standardization, and top down control. Follett's ideas emerged as a direct critique of such rigidity, proposing a more humane and collaborative approach.

Influences on Follett's Thought

1. Social Reform Movements – The Progressive Era's focus on workers' rights and community welfare informed Follett's emphasis on empowerment.
2. Systems Thinking – She saw organizations as living systems where every part influenced the whole.
3. Philosophical Roots – Her work drew on pragmatism and functionalism, stressing the practical outcomes of organizational decisions.

Core Concepts of Follett's Theory of Management

Follett's theory is built on several interrelated principles that collectively redefine the manager's role from an authority figure to a facilitator and collaborator.

1. Power Sharing and Participation

Follett argued that power should not be concentrated at the top. Instead, decision making should involve those who are directly affected by the outcomes. This participatory approach leads to higher commitment and better problem solving.

2. The Process of Management

She viewed management as a dynamic process rather than a static set of rules. This process involves continuous communication, negotiation, and adaptation.

3. Integration and Unity

Follett emphasized the need for integrating individual goals with organizational objectives. She coined the term "integration" to describe the blending of personal and collective interests into a unified vision.

4. Conflict as a Catalyst for Growth

Rather than viewing conflict as a negative, Follett saw it as an opportunity for innovation. She proposed constructive conflict resolution through dialogue and mutual understanding.

5. The "Living Organization" Metaphor

Follett likened organizations to living organisms that adapt to their environment. This perspective encourages flexibility and responsiveness in managerial practices.

Key Principles Explained

Power Sharing: From Authority to Collaboration

Traditional hierarchies often stifle creativity and reduce employee engagement. Follett's model promotes decentralization, giving teams the authority to make decisions within their scope. This not only speeds up processes but also cultivates a sense of ownership.

The Process of Management: Communication at the Core

Effective communication is the linchpin of Follett's management process. She stressed the importance of open dialogue, active listening, and transparent feedback loops. Managers should act as facilitators who enable information flow rather than gatekeepers.

Integration: Merging Individual and Organizational Goals

Follett's concept of integration is akin to aligning personal career aspirations with corporate mission. When employees see how their work contributes to larger objectives, motivation and performance improve.

Conflict Resolution: Turning Differences into Innovation

Follett introduced the idea of "constructive conflict." By encouraging respectful debate and collaborative problem solving, managers can harness divergent perspectives to generate innovative solutions.

Living Organization: Adaptation and Flexibility

In a rapidly changing business environment, static structures fail to survive. Follett's living organization metaphor reminds managers to remain adaptable, constantly reassessing strategies to meet external pressures.

Implications for Modern Management

While Follett's writings predate the digital age, the core tenets of her theory translate seamlessly into contemporary management challenges.

1. Agile and Flat Organizational Structures

Agile teams and flat hierarchies echo Follett's power sharing philosophy. By empowering cross functional squads, organizations can respond quickly to market shifts.

2. Remote Work and Digital Collaboration

With teams distributed across geographies, communication and collaboration tools become vital. Follett's emphasis on dialogue aligns with the need for robust virtual communication practices.

3. Employee Engagement and Well Being

Modern HR initiatives prioritize well being and engagement. Follett's integration principle supports these efforts by ensuring employees' personal goals align with company objectives.

4. Conflict Management in Diverse Teams

Diverse teams bring varied perspectives that can spark conflict. Applying Follett's constructive conflict framework helps harness this diversity for better decision making.

5. Leadership Development Programs

Leadership training often focuses on decision making and strategic thinking. Follett's emphasis on facilitation and collaboration offers a balanced approach to developing well rounded leaders.

Case Studies Illustrating Follett's Principles

Case 1: Google's "20% Time" Initiative

Google's policy allowing employees to spend 20% of their work time on projects of their choosing exemplifies power sharing and integration. This autonomy fuels innovation and aligns personal interests with the company's mission.

Case 2: Zappos' Holacracy

Zappos adopted a holacratic structure that eliminates traditional management layers. By distributing decision making authority, the company embodies Follett's process oriented approach and encourages continuous communication.

Case 3: Patagonia's Environmental Stewardship

Patagonia integrates its corporate social responsibility goals with employee engagement. The company's "Footprint Chronicles" involve staff in sustainability initiatives, illustrating the integration of individual and organizational values.

Case 4: The Agile Transformation at Spotify

Spotify's "Squad" model fosters self organizing teams that collaborate across disciplines. This structure reflects Follett's living organization concept, adapting quickly to user feedback and market changes.

Criticisms and Limitations of Follett's Theory

While Follett's ideas have been celebrated, some scholars and practitioners raise concerns:

- Practical Implementation – Critics argue that fully decentralized power structures can lead to decision paralysis in large organizations.
- Measurement Challenges – Quantifying the benefits of collaboration and integration can be difficult, making ROI assessment tough.
- Cultural Constraints – In cultures with high power distance, Follett's emphasis on participation may clash with traditional norms.
- Scalability – Applying her principles to multinational corporations with complex regulatory environments can be challenging.

Despite these critiques, many organizations have successfully blended Follett's concepts with modern practices, creating hybrid models that balance authority and collaboration.

Integrating Follett's Theory into Your Organization

Adopting Follett's principles requires intentional design and ongoing commitment. Below are practical steps to embed her ideas into your management culture.

1. Conduct a Power Audit

Map out decision making authority across departments. Identify bottlenecks and opportunities to delegate responsibilities.

2. Foster Open Communication Channels

- Implement regular town hall meetings.
- Use collaborative platforms (Slack, Teams, Trello).
- Encourage feedback loops at all levels.

3. Align Personal Development Plans with Corporate Goals

Help employees set career objectives that dovetail with organizational priorities. Offer mentorship programs and cross functional projects.

4. Design Conflict Resolution Protocols

Train managers to facilitate constructive debate. Use techniques like "devil's advocate" or "brainwriting" to surface diverse viewpoints.

5. Build a Culture of Continuous Adaptation

Encourage experimentation, celebrate failures as learning opportunities, and iterate processes based on feedback.

Conclusion

Mary Parker Follett's theory of management remains a beacon for modern leaders seeking to create more inclusive, adaptive, and resilient organizations. By embracing power sharing, collaborative processes, and the integration of individual and collective goals, managers can unlock higher levels of engagement and innovation. While implementation challenges exist, the enduring relevance of Follett's ideas—especially in an era defined by rapid change and digital connectivity—underscores the timeless value of her insights. As organizations continue to evolve, revisiting Follett's pioneering work offers a roadmap for building workplaces that thrive on collaboration, purpose, and shared success.

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