1 Ways of looking at organizations

Introduction
This book is about practice rather than theory; about the problems that arise in organizing and about what can be said about them that could be useful to the practising manager. However even the most practical managers can think about a problem more easily if they have some frame of reference that will help them to decide what kind of problem it is. Like the physician looking at a patient, they need to diagnose the class of malady. It may be a defect in the circulation system, when knowledge of its working and of the imbalance to which it is subject would be useful; or it may be a digestive problem, in which case a different area of knowledge would be appropriate. They might even decide that the malady is both a circulatory and a digestive one. Admittedly, knowledge of how the human body works is much more advanced than our understanding of the working of human organizations. Even so, theories of organization can give the manager greater insight into the nature of organizational problems.

Organizations are highly complex. We do not understand enough about how they work to have developed comprehensive theories. Instead we have a number of partial explanations which have been put forward by writers from different backgrounds. Each represents a different way of looking at organizations. An understanding of these different viewpoints can help managers to identify what kind of problem they are worrying about. Each of these schools of thought has made a contribution to our understanding of the way organizations work, but each also has its limitations – often not sufficiently appreciated by their supporters. This chapter will examine briefly the uses and limitations of three ways of looking at organizations, and then illustrate how all could be helpful in tackling a particular problem.

R. Stewart, The Reality of Organizations
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Most managers think of an organization in terms of its formal structure. If asked to describe it, they will talk about the different departments, and about the work that they do. They may talk more abstractly about responsibilities and authority. They will think of the organization as being composed of a number of levels, each of which is senior to the one below it. They may never have drawn an organization chart, and their company may not possess one, but they are likely to know what it looks like.

**The classical school**

The earliest writers on organization, like many managers today, thought of it as a formal structure. They sought to describe the rules – called principles – which should be used in designing this structure. Such principles were, they thought, applicable to all types of formal organization. These writers – called the classical school – and their successors down to the present day have discussed how to plan the formal organization of work.\(^1\) They have been concerned with the best way of dividing up the tasks to be done, with how to group these together into departments, and with how to deal with the problems of coordination. They have paid particular attention to organizational relationships between line and staff. They have stressed the need for a clear definition of responsibilities and of authority. Their chief contribution is the definition of responsibilities and of the tasks that have to be considered in building up an organization. They have provided a frame of reference that will help any manager to think clearly about the nature of the work to be done, about the best ways of dividing it up into jobs and departments and then of how to coordinate these divisions.

The work of these classical writers is not by itself sufficient for an understanding of organization; its approach has important limitations. It is too concerned with the formal structure, not sufficiently with the individuals who make the structure work. It is a static approach, paying too little attention to the many interactions that take place between different parts of an organization. It emphasizes similarities, without giving sufficient attention to the diversity of problems met in different types of organization. The