INTRODUCTION

“One might have supposed that the historians, who ascribe the actions of the masses to the will of one man, would have found it impossible to fit the flight of Napoleon’s armies into their theory, considering that during this period of the campaign the French did all they could to bring about their own ruin . . . . But no! Mountains of volumes have been written by historians about this campaign and in all of them we find accounts of Napoleon’s masterly arrangements and deeply considered plans; of the manoeuvres executed by the troops, of the strategy with which they were led and the military genius shown by the marshals” (Tolstoy, 1869).

As this quotation shows, debates about strategy applied to organizations are much older than modern management theory. These debates have not only been confined to what strategy is, but have also extended to questioning whether it exists at all, outside the heads of those who claim to practise it.

My reasons for using this particular quotation are not confined to establishing a historical context or to impressing my readers with literary erudition. Tolstoy’s “...odd ideas about the powerlessness of individual human beings” (Duffy, 1972), are expounded in the specific context of war and the functioning of military hierarchy and strategy. But the chosen subject of his work is just one which we find in a wider context that includes the management of business and organizations.

The word strategy comes from the Ancient Greek for the leader of an army, or a general. The word tactics from a word meaning an officer. In Western European culture we therefore have had several millennia of conforming to the concept that the higher few ‘strategically’ lead the many via the ‘tactical’ machinations of the middle ranks.

The language and concepts of military hierarchy have not disappeared with the passage of global military conflict. Having long since entered the business management context, they have persisted despite affectations of consent and liberal pluralism in many schools of modern management thinking.
The ‘Triangle’ referred to in the title of this paper refers to a diagram, Figure 1., versions of which perpetuate the ancient military concepts of strategy, tactics and operations. The diagram is generic, and has frequently appeared in management texts for at least twenty years, with some version of it appearing as an appendage to explanations of hierarchy in works purporting to present a view of ‘systems’ in a management context. Such presentations usually link the supposed levels of strategy, tactics and operations to the organizational positions of those who are responsible for their implementation. For academic peace I quote no references, but they are available to the pedantic.

In checking my sources I note that Anthony (1965) is quoted as the origin of this diagram, but I strongly suspect that it is much earlier. Urwick (1943) could be quoted as origins of “...the hierarchy of authority and the principles on which they were based”, as in Leavitt et al. (1973).

Such sources reveal the conceptual confusion the logical and the physical, or the ‘whats’ and the ‘hows’ of management hierarchy.

This paper aims to separate the logical and physical views of hierarchy and strategy, and to show that both liberal and authoritarian views of hierarchy are logically unsustainable and practically irrelevant to the design and implementation of information systems whose intention is to support the management of organizations.

THE LIMITATIONS OF PERSONAL OR TIME-SPAN HIERARCHY

The linking of the words strategy and tactics to their Ancient Greek origins is not just academic nicety. The physical binding of levels of managing with levels of managers persists. Thus just as strategy is for generals and tactics for officers, so versions of the Eternal Triangle persistently link strategy with such a description as ‘senior executives’, and tactics with ‘middle management’.

In an information age this is easily shown to be nonsense, even if it was ever true. Consider a simple, hopefully fictitious, case. During one of the sessions of an international conference a presenter causes a scandal by departing from his subject and treating his hearers to an offensive, say racist, diatribe. Most of his hearers walk out and some stay to make a noisy protest. In less than 24 hours the scandal caused is loudly featured in the local and national media. When confronted with this situation, does the Vice-Chancellor of the

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**Figure 1. 'The eternal triangle.'**