The Forgotten Name on the Relational Organization Theory: Mary Parker Follett

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Abstract

In today’s world where technological advancements are achieved in rapid succession and global competition has intensified, organizations need to be dynamic in adapting to existing conditions. A dynamic and flexible organizational structure is not alone sufficient, and the human resources departments of organizations also need to be creative, self-motivated, and self-learning in order to adapt themselves to the existing conditions. In this context, Mary Parker Follett, the subject matter of this paper, focuses on the dynamic and relational aspects of organizations in her period. She recommends an organizational life where individual participation is encouraged and fostered so that individuals can realize their potentials. Such opinions are parallel to current organizational and leadership theories.

Keywords: Relational Organization Theory, Mary Parker Follett, Management, Organization.

1. Introduction

As indicated in the template, papers should be prepared in single column format suitable for direct printing onto A4 paper (8.3 inches x 11.7 inches / 210 mm x 297 mm). Do not number pages as page numbers will be added later. Today’s increasingly competitive global market conditions and rapid technological changes are rapidly improving the technical innovation (new products and new technologies) or organizational innovation (structural changes) abilities, which are effective in maintaining the competitive potentials of economic enterprises (Gehani 2007: 388). Mary Parker Follett (1868-1933) put forward original ideas that formed the basis of modern management and organization discussions in the subjects of leadership, power and authority, conflict, and group behavior (Tonn 2003:1). Follett is known to describe organizations as a dynamic process. For Follett, authority, power, leadership, ordering, conflict and mediation are active and dynamic processes rather than inactive and structural processes. In this context, Follett argues that organizations have 4 basic features:

1. Co-ordination as the reciprocal relating of all the factors in a situation.

2. Co-ordination by direct contact of the responsible people concerned.

3. Co-ordination in the early stages.


Follett’s ideas about management and organization attract increasing attention in today's world (Melé 2007: 1). This is because Follett’s ideas about dynamism, empowerment, participation, leadership, conflict and experience are hot topics for today's organization and management domains. To illustrate, for Miles and Snow, rapid technological
changes and competition and the changing patterns of trade bring out new organizational structures in the form of “dynamic webs”. In this context, global economic enterprises are also linked with each employee’s specific ability, rather than being mere external strategic partners. In this case, the employees are expected to act as the connection points of dynamic webs, and constantly follow and adapt to the changes in the external environment of the organization. Similarly, Pfeffer, argues that innovative economic enterprises in the web structure would maintain their competitive edge only through empowerment, participation and knowledge sharing (Miller-Vaughan 2001:8). The most cited Follett’s ideas have been in the area of organization theory (Fry 1996:16).

2. Mary Parker Follett’s Brief Curriculum Vitae

Mary Parker Follett was born in Quincy, Boston in 1868. She had a troubled childhood due to her alcoholic father's erratic behavior. In 1880, she went to Thayer Academy. Following her father's death in 1885, Follett took care of the household at the age of 16. With the encouragement of her teacher (Anna Boynton Thompson) in 1888, she enrolled in Harvard Annex for Women. Here, she took history courses and attended the Newnham College, Cambridge University in England for one year (1890-1891) with the encouragement of her teacher Thompson, and she thought her experiences there were the turning points of her life (Gibson 2013:2).

Here, she took law, history, politics courses and learned about the lifestyle and working conditions in England. She resumed her education upon her arrival from England. Meanwhile, she published her first book “Speaker of the House of Representatives” in 1896. During this period, she started her history lectures at a special school (Mrs Show’s School) for 4 years. Follett established a long-term friendship with this school’s principal Isobel Briggs. She graduated from Harvard in 1898. Then, between 1900-1908, she worked as a social worker for the poor and underprivileged groups in Roxbury (Parker 1984:2).

At the Highland Union, she organized social, entertainment and recreational activities after working hours for the children of poor families who worked at the factories or stores (Metcalf-Urwick 1940:11). In this context, she started initiatives for the use of schools, which were vacant in Boston during the evening hours, for education and social activities. In 1908, she was elected the president of a municipal women's committee which aimed to realize this purpose. In 1917, she became the vice-president of the National Community Center Association. In 1918, she published her book “The New State”. In 1924, she organized a series of conferences for executives.

In the same year, she published her book “Creative Experience”. Between 1926-1928, she gave conferences. She moved to England in 1929 and died in 18 December 1933.

3. Relational Organization Theory and Mary Parker Follett

Relational organization pattern is also named as the web organization pattern, and starts by thinking that man is essentially a social being and accepts that our identity and method of perceiving the world around us are shaped through our interaction with others. Thus, the relational organization pattern is a reflection of interactive paradigm. Mary Parker Follett is one of the first persons who initiated this idea. Her basic starting point is the relational nature of human identity. She writes;

“We have long been trying to understand the relation of the individual to society; we are only just beginning to see that there is no “individual”, that there is no “society”…”Now that we know that there is no such thing as a separate ego, that individuals are created by reciprocal interplay, our whole study of psychology is being transformed“ (Godwyn- Gittell 2012:1).
Social behavior is a group process, which is composed of the relations of all of its pieces with one another and with the whole. And this is a unifying process. Unity is a cornerstone in the creation of both the behavior and goals; that is, it is a method to control behavioral patterns and the ultimate goal. The relational process between the piece and the whole is a key factor for management (Krupp 1961:87).

Follett’s relational approach to organizational sociology in her book The New State was earlier than Weber’s rational approach. Just as Weber was considered the pioneer of rational paradigm, Follett can perhaps be considered one of the pioneers of the interactive approach. Follett argued that reality came through circular responses at all levels of interaction. Follett states:

“In human relations, as I have said, this is obvious: I never react to you but to you-plus-me; or to be more accurate, it is I-plus-you reacting to you-plus-me. “I” can never influence “you” because you have already influenced me; that is, in the very process of meeting, by the very process of meeting, we both become something different”.

Follett, in her book Business as an Integrative Unity (2003:71), takes her relational perspective to the organizational level. She notes;

“It seems to me that the first test of business administration, of industrial organization, should be whether you have a business with all parts so co-ordinated, so moving together in their closely knit and adjusting activities, so linking, interlocking, interrelating, that they make a working unit—that is, not a congeries of separate pieces, but I have called a functional whole or integrative unity.”

Follett, beyond that, argues that the reciprocal relation status, that is, participants with different functions, saw what related to them by interacting with the whole, developed a more integral approach towards their specific tasks, thus ensuring development as a whole with the others. The interaction between these sections and the whole results in a higher level of organizational performance through interpersonal exchange. For Follett, in contrast to Weber, the relational pattern is actually the most direct path to efficacy and efficiency. Different from the rational paradigm, Follett’s interactionism does not allow for an emphasis of only the rational bureaucratic legal factor where the parties are separated from one another and which is free from social norms and values. As a matter of fact, the main subject of her study is integration and being relational. As the strength and main focus of subjectivism, interactionism is a process rather than being a concept of self and social structure. However, process is at the same time the weakness of this paradigm according to the opponents of this idea. Criticisms to this end include the study of subjectivism using qualitative data, lack of certainty, and the inability to generalize or repeat it (Godwyn-Gittell 2012: xvi-1).

The ideas affecting today’s thinking of organization and management may be grouped under the headings of dynamism, empowerment, participation, leadership, conflict, and experience (Miller-Vaughan 2001: 8-10);

**Dynamism:** Follett disagrees to a static analysis in her organizational studies. This is because she sees organizations as a union of dynamic social relationships emerging through the reciprocal responses of individuals. For example, she argues that another problem that has to be solved will come up with the introduction of new elements in the environment as soon as a problem is solved. In this context, the nature of interaction between individuals is cyclic rather than linear. For example, each individual action results in another's response, which affects the formation of the action. In this context, executives should not consider themselves to be free from the circumstances in which they are and they should consider that the circumstances could change in case of a problem-solving situation. In this case, the interaction in the environment is the determining factor. That is, an individual should give no orders to the other, and instead they both should accept one another's orders as a matter of the circumstances. To this end, Follett points out that the executive should act in consideration of the prevailing
circumstances in certain situations and problems in executive actions, instead of acting merely as an authority figure. Otherwise, that is, where the unique nature and dynamism of the circumstances of the environment are not considered, the results will be negative both for the individuals in the environment and for the organization as a whole.

**Empowerment:** First of all, Follett questions the word “power”. What is power? Is it an influence, force, or leadership? Follett makes a simple definition of power: the ability to make things happen, to be a causal agent, to initiate change. Control, in this regard, can also be seen as power. Authority is the person with the power to control. However, having the power and being strong are not necessarily the same. This is because, in some cases, our desire to control a situation may also be our weakness (Follett 1940: 99). Follett divides the phenomenon of power into two: First is power-over, which means the individual's or group's pressure on the other individual or group; and the second is power with, which means non-coercive power used and developed together (Follett 1940:101). Follett sees power as a potential that the individual can develop himself, rather than a pre-existing, given, or seized potential. She does not believe that power can be distributed in this sense, but she believes that an executive can nurture and develop their power by giving them opportunities. Thus, power comes from an effective relationship of the individual with the others, showing itself in supporting the employers in the organizations. This thinking of Follett is a generally accepted understanding in the sense that employers in a business place can improve his power by being empowered.

**Participation:** For Follett, participation is each individual's inclusion in a unit comprised of interrelated activities in line with the capacity of each individual. However, a machine cannot be built just by bringing together all of its pieces together. This is because these pieces need to be related with one another. For an effective participation in organizations, employee contributions should be coordinated to create a functioning whole. (Follett 1940:212). This can be achieved by coordination, a barrier-free communication, and communication based on clarity, openness and understanding. Follett states that participation corresponds not to self-sacrifice, but self-contribution. So, how will the employee participation be recruited? (Follett 1940: 213): With an organizational structure that will recruit participation, a method should be employed that will achieve different levels of participation from individuals with different educational backgrounds, natures and skills by recognizing the principles of participation in day-to-day management operations and acting accordingly. Follett argues that there are 3 ways for the participation of different individuals: domination, compromise and integration. In domination, only one party gets what it wants; in compromise, none of the parties gets what they want; and in integration, a way can be found where both parties will get what they want. However, this requires hard thinking, inventiveness and ingenuity. Integration is to ensure the creation of a new situation rather than an expected situation. Follett’s ideas about participation are supported by today's management thinking by ensuring that employees work by creating teams in the business place and valuing diversity and using it in the interests of the organization.

**Leadership:** There is a clear distinction in Follett’s ideas in theory and practice on this subject. Follet, according to her leadership theory, argues that a leader is described as a person whose orders are obeyed, but in practice he is the person who gives the orders required by the particular circumstances. A leader is a person who sees another over-the-horizon picture. He is a person belonging to the existing picture but who sees what is not yet there. The leader is responsible for clearly defining the objectives of the organization, and this is not his personal objective, but one that comes out separate from his particular group. Follett also argues that successful leaders are individuals who recognize and use organization-wide leadership and power. Follett’s leadership concept puts not too much emphasis on the leader's ordering role. Thus, Follett’s ideas about leadership overlaps with the modern concept of leader who reflects a shared vision and inspires others to be inventive and to change in order to achieve new targets.

**Conflict:** Follett is mostly known for her in-depth analysis of conflict situations. For her, a conflict is neither bad nor good. A conflict is merely a reflection of the differences between individuals' opinions and interests. The difference is not just between the employer and the employee; differences actually come up everywhere including
among executives and in board meetings, and this is unavoidable. There are 3 possible conclusions in case of conflicts: domination, compromise and integration. Domination is perhaps the easiest way in coping with a conflict, but it is not necessarily the one that leads to the best possible result. In this case, one of the parties will be victorious over the other. Such a victory may be an achievement for a brief moment but achievement may be short-breathed. In compromise, the second way, each of the parties makes certain compromises to achieve peace. However, conflict appears repeatedly in different forms. This is because the factors causing a conflict maintain their existence with communication. Integration is the third conclusion. The first step is the recognition of differences. That is to say, the difference causing the conflict needs to be recognized. Thus, we will also have the opportunity to reevaluate our desires. We will evaluate the thoughts underlying our desires. The second step is to collect the desires of both parties and disintegrate them. It is analyzing the symbols that constitute the pieces. That is, it is getting the opinions of parties about such pieces. What do they think, and what meanings do they attribute? A third solution can be found after discussing the subject, in which case, none of the parties will be required to sacrifice their desires. Follett, to complete this explanation, describes an incident that took place at the Harvard University Library: One of the persons in a small room of the library tries to open the window for some fresh air, but Follett does not want air directly blowing on himself when the window is opened, so the conflict is ended by opening a window in the adjacent room where there were no one. In this case, both parties achieve their goals. The person who wanted some fresh air did not have a particular window in his mind, and the person who wanted no windows to be open did not want air directly blowing on himself rather than disallowing fresh air to enter, so opening a window in the adjacent room satisfied the desires of both parties. That is to say, integration will be achieved through this new way. In compromise, a conclusion will be produced about existing desires; and, in integration, there is a new way that has not been attempted before. With such solutions, conflicts can actually be beneficial. Therefore, thinking differently is considered normal rather than as a pathological experience. Different from compromise, the underlying factors of the conflict are eliminated but this does not last forever because another conflict might come up at the next stage. In this case, the basic research question is not whether there is conflict in any organization. The big question is how do we cope with the conflict?

Experience: For Follett, life is a continuing process. We develop our experience and learning while interacting with others. In this context, Follett believes that executives should share their experiences and experiments, by comparing and discussing conclusions with each other. So, she states that the education of executives is important and that executives need to make themselves ready by taking the management responsibilities seriously. Follett uses the analogy of a piano as an example of executives sharing their experience with others in an executive's words “They teach us how to play the piano, and then recruit us into an orchestra.”

4. Conclusion

Mary Parker Follett is in fact a social worker with no executive experience in a business who put forward her ideas on management and organization during the early 1900’s, in an era when F. Taylor’s Scientific Management Movement was increasingly gaining approval. Her period also coincides a recovery period after World War I. In this regard, Follett also dealt with the concept of democracy, citing a government approach where citizen participation is ensured in her book The New State. One of the basic reasons she dealt with the subject of organizations and management in her later life was her intention to reflect the democratic life that started in the organization level - through the participation and nurturing of employees in an organizational structure, and through coordination at every level and the principle of making decisions in harmony with the circumstances- on the society as a first step of achieving a democratic way of life in the society. A democratic lifestyle can be possible through democratic participation in organizations and individual contribution to the whole in line with their capabilities, which is one of the basic elements of social life.
Although Follett’s ideas attracted interest among executives and researchers during her period, they had a limited practice. One can conclude that, throughout the history, ideas that conformed to the intellectual, social, cultural understanding, namely the zeitgeist, of every period and met their particular needs were adopted and implemented. Follett’s ideas were beyond her time, and even beyond our present day. Follett basically strives for the creation of an environment wherein man can realize his own potential in the society. In modern organizational theories, it is generally accepted that an organizational structure is dynamic within the adaptation processes conforming to its current environment rather than being an inactive, finished and completed process. Employee participation in the decision-making process is considered necessary for an effective, efficient and creative working environment in line with the employee skills and business tasks. Perhaps, Follett’s most important ideas are her ideas about conflict. It should be noted that she interprets conflict as an inevitable phenomenon for every environment and for all times, and a rather routine thing as the reflection of differences in an environment where actually individuals with diverse characters live together, rather than being a pathological situation. By recognizing differences and understanding from which semantic codes differences emerge, a relational stage that is different from the previous one will actually be transitioned, rather than a conflict situation. As a last word; Follett’s ideas are becoming more and more important in today's world as described above. Many theoreticians are reviewing her ideas in line with today's circumstances. However, republishing Follett’s works and introducing them with the new generations will be an appreciation of the efforts of those who contributed to scientific knowledge.

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References


