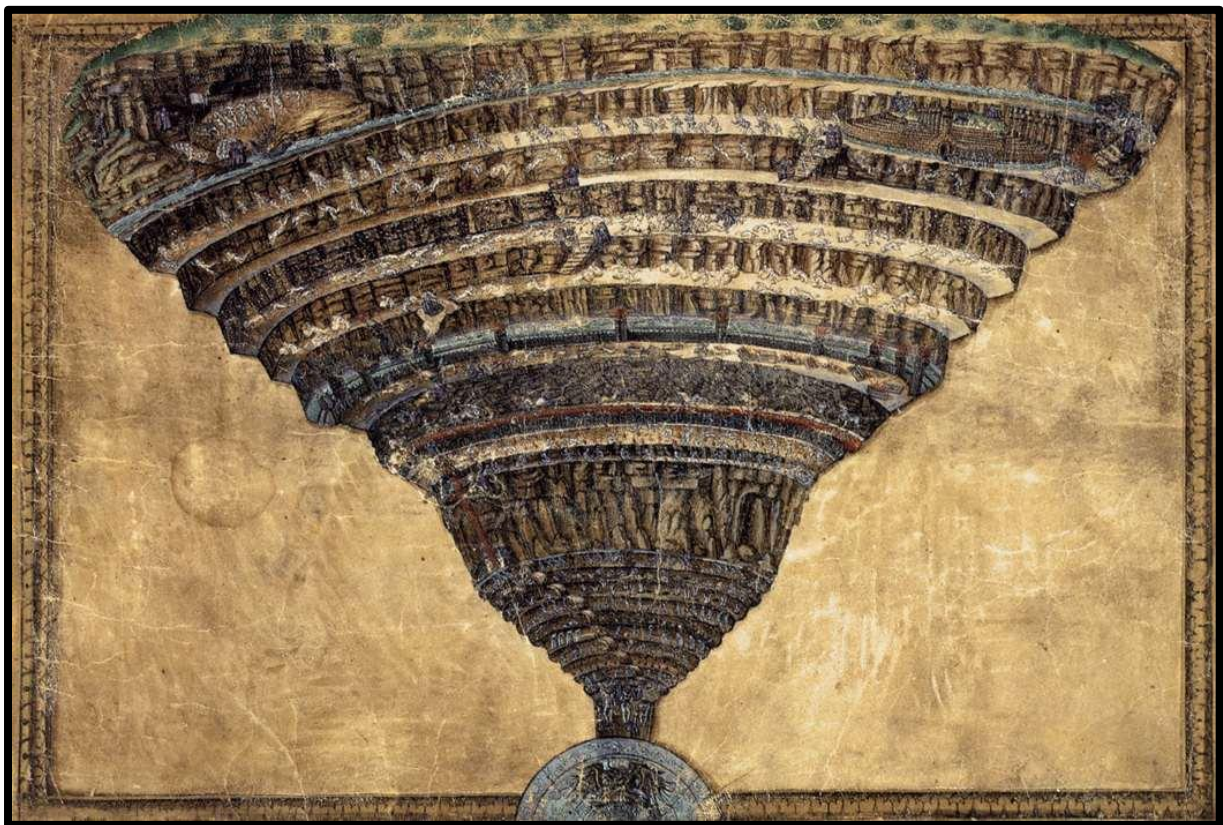# The Devil and the Modern Manager

Organizational lessons from the Inferno – first part of Dante's Divine Comedy

By Mainak Sankar Maiti

(1730 words)

Fig 1 – "The Abyss of Hell" by Sandro Botticelli[1]

Introduction

Dante Alighieri wrote the epic poem "Divine Comedy" (Italian: *Divina Commedia*) in the period 1308 A.D to 1321 A.D. Considered one of the greatest works on World literature, the poem is an allegorical representation of man's journey towards God. The poem is divided in three parts: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. Of all the three parts, Inferno remains the most celebrated and the most influential till date. Numerous artworks and books have been inspired by the Inferno. The works inspired by the Inferno range

from the Renaissance painter Botticelli's illustrations of the hell to modern computer games. More than seven hundred years have passed; however, the Inferno continues to enthral readers all around the world. But, does the Inferno have anything in store for a manager seeking to achieve organizational efficiency? Dante's macabre vision of hell was brought to life by Botticelli in his infamous painting "The Map of Hell" or, "The Abyss of Hell", which remains one of the most fear-invoking artworks of all time. But, can that work invoke some new thoughts in the mind of a management student and expand his span of thinking, his horizons?

Hell – the Model Organization

"Organizational structure is more than boxes on a chart; it is a pattern of interactions and coordination that links the technology, tasks, and human components of the organization to ensure that the organization accomplishes its purposes."

Dante had written the epic while in exile, after he fell foul with the bitter factional struggles of the Florentine republic. The poem describes his own journey through the infernal realm of Hell, under the guidance of the Italian poet Virgil – the poem records what they saw there, as if it were a true memoir. Divine Comedy is considered to be one of the most precise pieces of European literature.

Apparently, when Dante passes through the gates of hell, he sees an inscription – "*Lasciateognesperanza, voich'intrate*" – literally translated to "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here". However, a student seeking the basic organizational structure that leads of effective management, should be feeling hopeful, for what Dante describes in the next 33 cantos or divisions, is an amazingly accurate description of what the modern managers describe as an effective organizational structure.

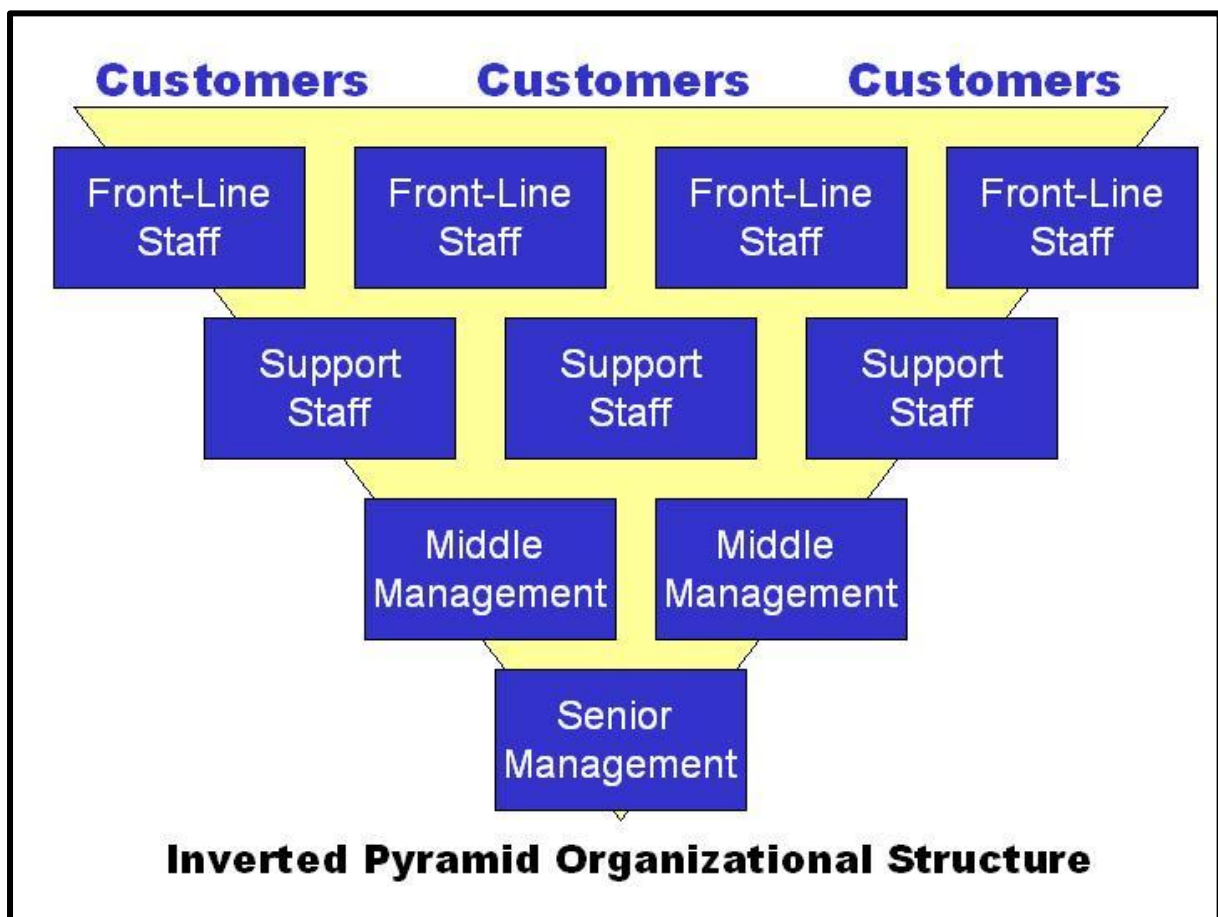Let us examine what is considered to be an effective and efficient organizational design today.

Differentiation is the method of deciding the division of work in an organization. It ensures that all essential tasks are assigned to one or more jobs, giving them the attention they need. Differentiation is multi-dimensional and has three different forms – horizontal, vertical, and spatial.

Integration is the process by which organizations design and develop linkage and coordination mechanisms for different parts of the organization. These mechanisms are designed to achieve unity among individuals and groups in

various jobs, departments, and divisions in order to accomplish organizational goals and tasks.

The best combination of differentiation and integration is the key to accomplishing the organizational goals, thereby, achieving a model organizational structure.

The new organizational paradigm suggests an inverted pyramid structure, where the focus is on serving customers at the top, by the front-line employees, the front-line supervisors see their employees as their customers and are set about the task of identifying and meeting their needs, and so on and so forth down the pyramid, all the way down to the CEO, or the head of the organization.

Customers   Customers   Customers

Front-Line Staff   Front-Line Staff   Front-Line Staff   Front-Line Staff

Support Staff   Support Staff   Support Staff

Middle Management   Middle Management

Senior Management

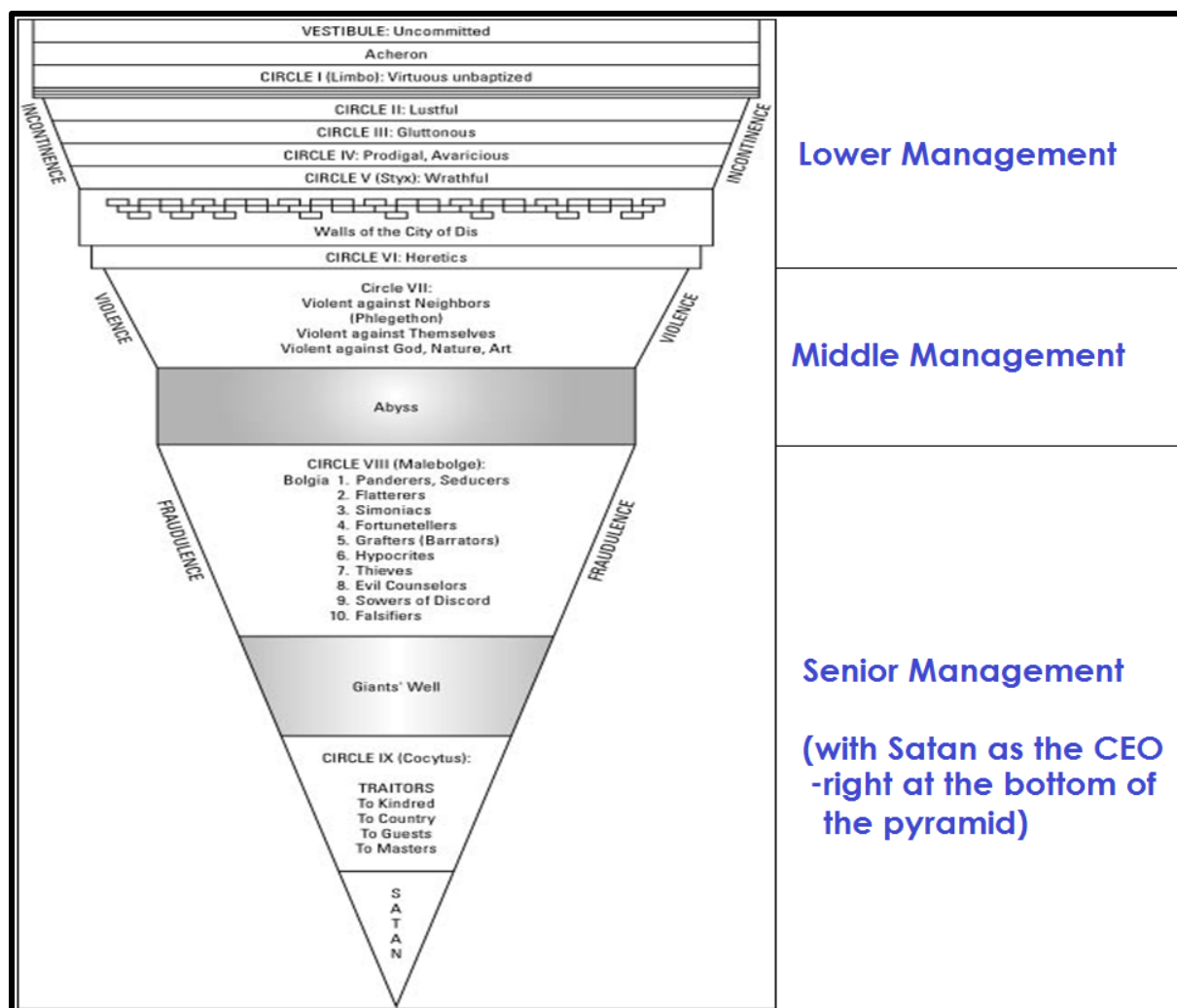**Inverted Pyramid Organizational Structure**

Fig 2[2]

The fact to keep in mind here is that most of these modern organizational designs and paradigms have been conceptualized in the twentieth and the twenty-first century. Prior to that, organizations used to employ a top-down, upright vertical pyramid structure, where the CEO/ senior management used to be at the top of the pyramid and the front-line employees used to be at

the bottom. The employees, rather than serving the needs of the customers, were more focussed on serving the needs of their immediate supervisor and, so on and so forth, up the pyramid.

Now, let us examine the structure of hell, which can be found in Dante's Inferno.

Dante has divided Hell into nine circles. These circles are concentric in nature, representing a gradual increase in the degree of sinfulness, culminating at the centre of the earth, where Satan himself is held in bondage. Sinners of each circle are punished in a manner befitting their crimes. The first five circles of the Inferno represent self-indulgent sins (Limbo, Lust, Gluttony, Avarice and Wrath & Sloth). Next two circles represent the violent sins (Heresy and Violence). The final two circles represent the malicious sins (Fraud and Treachery). The treacherous sinners, who reside at the deepest circle of the Inferno, are punished by CEO of hell, the Devil himself. The nine circles are arranged in a vestibular inverted triangle structure, which was famously brought to life by Botticelli (Refer Figure 1). Moreover, Dante has performed horizontal and vertical differentiation inside some of the circles too. For example, he has vertically differentiated the seventh circle of violence into three levels, in the order of increasing level of wickedness – Violence against Neighbours (outer ring), violence against self (middle ring) and violence against God, Art, and Nature. In the eighth circle, he has performed horizontal differentiation, by dividing the circle into ten *Bolgie*, or ditches of stone, with bridges spanning the ditches – Bolgia one for the seducers and panderers, bolgia 2 for the Flatterers, bolgia 3 for those who committed simony, four for fortune tellers, and diviners, bolgia five for the grafters, six for the hypocrites, seven for the thieves, eight for the evil counsellors, bolgia nine for the sowers of discord and the final bolgia for the various sorts of falsifiers (alchemists, counterfeiters, perjurers, and imposters). Even the final circle of hell, the ninth one, has also been divided vertically into four concentric rounds, increasing in its level of seriousness – round one (Caïna) corresponds to betrayal of family ties, round two (Antenora) to the betrayal of community ties, round three (Ptolomaea) to betrayal of guests and the final and the most heinous round (Judecca) of all corresponds to betrayal of liege lords and benefactors.

Now, if we try to form an organizational structure of Dante's version of the hell, with all its levels of hierarchy and intra-circular differentiations, it would look something like this:

Fig 3 – Organizational structure of Hell

Please note that this structure is exactly same as the one depicted in figure 2 – the modern inverted pyramid, bottom up structure of an organization, with the senior management right at the bottom of the pyramid. The punishment for each circle of hell is also unique, ascribing to the different natures of jobs at different levels of an organization. This is the same organizational structure which many companies are following today.

The interesting successful thing to note is that this structure of hell was formed by Dante seven hundred years ago. It is of little surprise, that Dante has described hell having brutally efficient and effective in punishing the sinners – any organization with such design is bound to effective and efficient.

Devil – the perfect CEO

The modern manager has a lot to learn from the Devil in terms of running an organization effectively. He sits at the bottom, "attending to the needs" of the three souls, who according to Dante were the worst sinners of all time –

Brutus, Judas, and Cassius. Judas is deemed to be the worst sinner, so he receives the worst punishment of all – he is gnawed by the most vicious of the three mouths of Satan and his back being forever skinned by Satan's claws. The Devil has been described in the Inferno as a giant, terrifying beast with three faces – one red, one black and one pale yellow. He remains waist deep in ice, with no chance of any escape. He beats his six wings trying to do exactly that, that is to escape, however, the icy wind that emanates due to his flapping of wings, only further ensures, not only his, but also others' imprisonment in the circle.

Fig 4 – Satan can teach modern managers how to run an organization[3]

Horrifying imagery aside, the thing to note here is that the Devil does not meddle in the overall activities of his organization. He is only concerned about three sinners. He has given responsibilities to his lieutenants, who run the outer and the middle circles of hell with brutal efficiency. Whenever, there is some unrest in his own circle, he takes measure by flapping his wings and preventing the escape of the sinners. He is methodical and has a brilliant sense of organizational structure and design. Modern managers should strive to achieve the same – not skin the backs of their employees, but attend to their needs, not wants. Sinners want to escape Satan, but they need to be punished for their sins, so Satan punishes them and doesn't let them escape – giving the employee what he needs and not what he wants.

Conclusion

It is needless to mention that Dante's Inferno is not the only literary work from which one can draw managerial inspirations. Creativity, as well as the willingness to learn and gain insights from, well anything, is a crucial part of effective management skills. There are countless Artworks and literature out there which can not only make us better managers, but a better human being altogether. A few examples would be "Bhagavad Gita" by VedVyasa, "The Iliad" by Homer, "The Mahabharata" by VedVyasa, "The Godfather" by Mario Puzo, and the masterpieces of the renaissance artists such as Leanardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. There is no dearth of such examples.

In today's complex society, organizational structures and behaviours are growing in complexity day by day. Sometimes, looking towards the future is not the solution. Sometimes, past works may offer one a completely different perspective, a fresh view, which might help in providing solutions. It would be unwise for us to ignore the intellectual treasure hidden in Literature and Arts. We are at the verge of a new dawn, a new era and we need all the help we can get to be successful in the coming age. Only the seeds of the past can reap fruits in the future. Only with the help of the collective wisdom of literature and arts, can we become successful managers and leaders of the world.

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