

Management theory and practice

[Business](#), [Management](#)



Introduction

Mary Parker Follett (1868-1933), was an early political scientist and is considered to be one of the most prominent American management theorists in the earlier half of the 20th century (Montana & Chimov 2000, p. 17). She is considered to be one of the founders of the field of Public Administration and organization studies. Labeled by many famous management writers, as the ‘Prophet of Management’ and the ‘Mother of Scientific Management’, she was a critical and independent thinker who has a powerful impact on the management theory in the 1920s and 1930s (Orlikowski 1996, p. 427).

Though an American by birth her work was better known in other countries like Britain and Japan. Some theorists attribute this to her being a woman with ideas that were far beyond her time. Another reason why her work did not have as much impact as other management theorists may also be because she worked as a social worker rather than in exalted business circles.

Her approach for a social responsibility and working together was also in direct contrast to the use of power and authority, which was prevalent in the times when she was writing and lecturing (Tosi, Mero & Rizzo 2001, p. 11). The multinational and multicultural expansion of businesses has led to a different nature of roles and responsibilities among the management group. Today many companies are struggling towards corporate social responsibility and the ideas which Ms Follett had introduced years ago are being brought back into the light.

The works of Mary Parker became obscure for a long time due to the disinterest among the companies at the time to look for a social responsibility and team work based organization. During her earlier studies, she met Dr. H Metcalf who later published many of her lectures. Dr. Metcalf together with Colonel L. Urwick together in the year 1941 assembled her lectures in a book called Dynamic Administration, which forms the basis for many researches looking for Follett's work (Orlikowski 2003, p. 426)

The Ideas of Mary Parker Follett

Mary Parker Follett challenged the ideas of scientific management prevalent at the time, and helped in laying foundations to the human relations school of management (Witzel 2003 p. 102). Her idea was to control people by working with them. The industry at that time was completely hierarchical and authority and power were exerted in a military style. Follett however rooted for an entirely different style of management. She advocated for flatter hierarchies, teamwork and participative management leadership based on ability, cooperative conflict resolution and a shared corporate vision (Bloom & Reichert 1998, p. 258).

This may be one of the reasons why her ideas were not immediately accepted in the US, where power games were the mainstay for any type of business. The companies were inherently family businesses and the leadership was the next successor to the family whether worthy or not. Teamwork was an unheard of concept, as the management scoffed at it and the subordinates worked solely at the directions of their superiors.

Follett's research and writings pointed to a collaborative approach to problem solving which advocated compromise. In fact one of her favorite admonitions to the management was ' don't over-manage your employees', calling over-managing of employees as bossism. Now days, this process is known as micromanaging by many of the corporate houses.

According to her workers could recognize the logic of a situation present in any management request and would comply accordingly (Montana & Chamov 2000, p. 17). Hence, the management task was to formulate their requests in a logical way but to resist giving too many orders. Her work in modern times constitutes the basis of problem solving and hence is receiving renewed interest.

For avoiding over-management situations in organizations, Mary Parker developed the law of situation in 1928. According to her, leaders would be more successful if they would adjust their style of leadership to the needs of their subordinates and to the requirements of the situation(Covell, Walker, Siciliano & Hess 2007, p. 37) .

This approach is reflected in today's scenario as contingency view, and can be seen in almost every aspect of management. Organizations usually have contingency plans, which are basically options for every situation which is likely to be encountered. A further offshoot of this plan is the Risk Management, which is the current buzzword in management of organizations.

Mary Follett thought that use of authority may have negative effects. Contrary to the popular belief it does not flow downward on principle, but the

interactions of various process and most importantly people with intelligent thought influence its progress throughout the channels (Tosi, Mero & Rizzo, 2000, p. 11). Also in case of conflicts, she thought that a collaborative solution would tend to be productive as it would lead to integrative problem solving, rather than just exerting authority over the subordinates to impose a solution. In a sense differences would have a positive effect as they would lead to an analysis of the entire boundary of the solution.

Mary Follett considered the process of management to be participative instead of one-sided. It hence follows that the job of the management is to channel both group activity and group conflicts and use them constructively to find solutions. She understood the complex social situations and focused on the working groups, which in her view should be managed efficiently instead of order to get the best results (Collins 2000, p. 54). This holds true in today's world with many companies being too large and hence being decentralized without losing their identity or corporate culture. Hence, management should focus on getting things done by their employees instead of controlling them at every level.

The theories proposed by Mary Follett were not just related to organizations. Some of them also concerned the professional working within these organizations. The popular term used by employees in recent times is professionalism. The word was defined by Mary Parker in a way that holds true in recent terms. According to Follett, "A professional is a person who maintains loyalty to a code of ethics that transcends to a loyalty to the rest of the organization." (Shell 2003, p. 2) Hence, the term is usually used by

freelance or consultants who do not bend their ethics for loyalty towards a company.

Applications of Follett's principles to organizations

Mary Follett was one of the pioneers of the profession of Management Consultant in Britain. She worked for global giants like Unilever as well as progressive Quaker firms (Murphy 2005 p. 80). In both these organizations she held major influence in bringing the human relations principles to managements.

Her thoughts however were forgotten for a long time before the globalization of organizations and the consequent increase in difficulty in managing organizations by a single party. This prompted a structure of globalization where the organization looked into becoming better managed rather than more controlled. The principle of human relations can be seen in many of the organizations whether they explicitly follow the principles or not

As an example Samsung is one of the giant corporations which had to be decentralized due to the political conditions prevalent in Korea at the time. The company went in for a complete decentralization where each of the industries are governed by an independent body.

However, each of the companies follows single corporate vision which joins the company under one head. Samsung prepares its own chips for the end products, and is a world leader in both the mobile and chip segments. The effective delegation of work is one of the chief elements of Mary Follett's lectures

One of the major ironies is that while the work of Mary Parker was not very much in vogue in United States, countries like Britain and especially Japan embraced her philosophy. The Japanese have always been appreciative of her work because it has been in tune with the consensual, thoughtful, careful and above all respectful approach which is the characteristic of Japanese people.

This is probably the reason why many of the Japanese companies follow the approach for joining huge corporations -Sony is an example of a huge company conglomerate which is entirely decentralized. In addition it is collaboration with many companies for future research (Mant 1999, p. 99)

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