

Monarchs, Lords and Serfs

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Modern organizations often resemble feudal hierarchies: organizational kingdoms with monarchs, lords, and serfs. At the top is a monarch, who more or less reigns over everything. Of course, the title today is dressed up with contemporary lingo. In business, monarchs are called chief executives, presidents, and managing directors. In government they carry titles like president, governor, minister, or cabinet secretary. Schools and colleges have presidents, school superintendents, headmasters and principals. Whatever their label, monarchs preside over a corporate "kingdom." Their subjects often presume that the wisdom or folly of the monarch's rule is fateful for the realm's health and well-being. Monarchs' images are larger-than-life and closely identified with their domain. Microsoft is Bill Gates and vice-versa. Few of Microsoft's millions of customers could identify anyone else who works for the company. Until he retired, the same was true for Jack Welch and General Electric. Equating organizations with the current monarch helps put a face on a large, impersonal entity. A monarch is also a convenient target for praise or blame. Whatever we like or hate about Microsoft, its products, or its dominant position in the digital revolution, we can lay at Bill Gates' doorstep.

What is less often noticed is that the office of the monarch includes more than one individual. There's also a powerful inner circle, a palace guard -- with titles like chief of staff, vice-president, assistant or counsel. The inner circle is often invisible and typically operates behind the scenes. But it's formidable because it controls the flow of information in and out of the palace, and often acts in the name of the monarch.

Beyond the palace, scattered across the hinterland, are the lords. Like monarchs, lords govern their particular domains. But they report to the monarch or to another lord, and serve more or less at their master's pleasure. The feudal hierarchy of greater and lesser nobility (dukes, earls, viscounts, etc.) is still with us. But now we call them middle managers.

At the bottom of the pecking order are the serfs: folks who do the basic work. In feudal times, serfs grew crops and plied trades. Later, the industrial revolution turned them into blue-collar workers. In recent years, the information economy has replaced production workers with Dilberts: legions of cubicle dwellers who stoke organizations' information furnaces. The new serfdom includes engineers, technicians, accountants, clerical staff, telemarketers and a variety of other white collar jobs. The common link: they're all 'individual contributors,' parked near the bottom of the hierarchy and presiding over no significant domain -- except their own small work space.

Barry Oshry¹ has spent his professional life studying the relationships among monarchs, lords, and serfs. He's found that the three groups live in distinct but predictable worlds. Put people in any of the three levels. Their thoughts, feelings and actions will soon

conform to the rules of that particular sphere. Life at the top is similar across organizations and sectors. The same is true for the middle and bottom. Despite the rosy stereotypes, life at the top isn't easy. Elites live in a world of complexity, responsibility and burden. They're bombarded with information, questions and problems, most of which are ambiguous and confusing. There's too much irrelevant information, and not enough of what they really need.

At the top, you're overwhelmed with too much stuff and too little time and energy to get to it all. You feel responsible for the realm's overall health and performance. You're expected to chart a clear long-term course, make crisp decisions and solve immediate problems. The stakes are very high. If you fall short or fail, you're afraid that war, famine and pestilence will infect the entire domain. There's no way you can do it all. But you're reluctant to delegate, because you're not sure your palace guard or lords can handle things. The burden of details and problems grows heavier and heavier. You age quickly, and fret over burnout, illness or early death. Meanwhile, urgent problems keep piling up. Everything's falling apart and everyone's looking to you for answers. Your retainers don't want to move without your guidance. If they act, they're afraid you'll have their heads. But if they hesitate, they expect to be lacerated for indolence and sloth.

Jimmy Carter was a do-it-himself monarch, and his presidency became a painful, downhill spiral. Ronald Reagan, on the other hand, was different. At a European summit meeting, it became obvious that the president hadn't read his briefing book. When James Baker, the president's aide, pulled him aside to ask why, Reagan responded genially, "Well, Jim, *The Sound of Music* was on T.V. last night." Carter knew more about the details. But Reagan got reelected.

Monarchs like Reagan avoid much of the awesome responsibility of their role. They have more fun and don't feel as burdened because they cut their retainers a lot of slack. The palace guard and lords are delighted with the freedom to deal with their respective problems and priorities. Lax oversight lets them compete intensely for the monarch's favor and largesse, even though they're supposed to be team players. Their autonomy also frees them to go off in a variety of directions -- some potentially dangerous. The Reagan presidency's most damaging episode originated within the White House itself. The Iran-Contra affair was a tale of clandestine arms sales to Iran with proceeds illegally diverted to Nicaraguan *contras*. All this was spearheaded by Colonel Oliver North and his colleagues in the National Security Council. Faced with a damning report from a commission he'd appointed, Reagan took refuge in a plea of ignorance. He acknowledged that "mistakes had been made," while claiming to be oblivious of the actions taken by his palace guard. Whether it got him off the hook or not, only history will tell.

When the prince and the pauper traded places in Mark Twain's famous novel, each was stunned at how the other lived. It's the same in most organizations. At the bottom of the food chain, serfs live a life very different from monarchs. They're not weighed down by an endless burden of problems and responsibilities. They don't lie awake at night worrying about high-stakes decisions and unfinished tasks. In fact, their life is pretty simple: show up, do a passable job, and go home. What's tough for them to understand is why upper management keeps screwing things up. They accuse bosses of

micromanaging, giving silly orders, making bonehead decisions, and constantly changing course for no apparent reason. The serfs' biggest problem isn't complexity or responsibility. It's feeling vulnerable and helpless. "Bosses" make all the key decisions: how much serfs are paid, what they do, and whether they keep their jobs. Serfs feel manipulated, exploited, and underrewarded. They often compensate by tuning off or dropping out. In today's high-tech workplace, they build a virtual moat around their cubicle and surf the Internet. They often shun feelings of responsibility for workplace health or productivity. That's the bosses' job. In the same breath, they express doubts that their managers are smart enough to change light bulbs.

Sandwiched between the monarch and serfs are the lords. Since they're dependent on the monarch, their well-being depends on faithfully executing directives from above. But the palace always seems to expect the impossible. It demands unrealistic levels of speed, efficiency, and productivity -- at very low cost. To deliver, lords need enthusiastic support from serfs, but eager serfs are hard to find. The monarch and palace guard wonder why the lords are so weak. Why can't they get anything done? Why can't they keep the serfs in line? Serfs are equally disappointed. Like Dilbert and his colleagues, they wonder why their bosses are such clueless, bumbling petty tyrants. Why are decisions always late? Why do the lords constantly change their minds? Why can't they communicate better? Above all, why are wages and working conditions so dismal? Caught in the middle, Lords struggle to satisfy both a demanding monarch and sullen serfs. Often they succeed in pleasing no one.

Enter the Customer

Capitalism greatly enhances the importance and power of a role that played only a bit part in feudalism: the client or customer, the individual who can buy or reject whatever the organization is offering. Clients and customers basically feel entitled: to what they want, when they want it, at the price they want to pay. They typically assume it is the organization's responsibility to figure out how to give them what they want. Monarchs usually try to shoulder that responsibility, but it becomes a major source of their sense of burden and overload. They have trouble discerning what the customer really wants, and as much or more trouble figuring out how to get their organization to deliver. The customer often winds up feeling misunderstood, disrespected or screwed, while the monarchs see the customer as demanding, unreasonable and impossible to please.

The battle among monarchs, lords and serfs has endured for centuries. It won't end soon. If you live in the modern equivalent of a feudal system, it helps to know your place in the pecking order, and how it interacts with other levels. Your tier may be dreary, and the whole structure may be creaking. But understanding the system is a first step toward moving things in more productive directions.

¹Barry Oshry, *Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries of Organizational Life*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1995.