

# Are you working in a pyramid?

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## Pyramids

A traditional business is like a pyramid of people. The higher a person sits, the more important they are, the greater their responsibility, office, title, pay and benefits. They wield power over those below through hiring, firing, setting goals and work. Those below are generally not expected to make their own decisions but to follow orders and accept received wisdom.

Over time people can move up through the pyramid if their work is of sufficient quality. It is rare to move down, but moving sideways and being thrown out altogether are common.

Pyramids are obsessed with growth; and expend great energy to grow taller and wider, and to become the biggest pyramid in the neighbourhood. With growth come the main benefits to shareholders: enhanced prestige and financial return. The incentive for employees is security, and a clear, if slow, path up through the pyramid throughout their working lives.

Many business are structured in this way simply because it is familiar, well understood, considered effective, little questioned, and low-risk. Boundaries can be maintained through dress; corporate identity, mission, and philosophy; culture and social pressure.

## The Problems

A pyramid involves placing people in positions of power over others, implicitly making a judgement about their relative worth. These judgements are then built into the structure of the pyramid, reinforcing them and de-personalising any challenge.

This is a competitive model of advancement. The further up you go the fewer positions are available, and the greater is the competition. To gain competitive advantage, employees are incentivised to hide knowledge from others, be guarded and clam up, obscuring the truth and inhibiting productive cooperation.

Those who join on the ground floor take with them a (usually secret) hope that they will rise to the very top faster than the norm. These expectations are born from a rose-tinted view of the structure, plus an ego-driven belief in their own superiority. In almost all cases, these expectations are never completely fulfilled.

Progress up through a pyramid is very slow, and open to outsiders entering even at the highest levels. Employees can feel undervalued, held back, and insufficiently rewarded, leading to disillusionment and demotivation.

## Common Solutions

Some tackle these problems by moving from pyramid to pyramid, to see if they can find an environment which better meets their needs - perhaps a flatter pyramid with fewer levels, or a smaller pyramid with a greater chance to make a difference.

Others simply stay put and settle for the security of the status quo. If disillusionment later sets in, they may have financial commitments that raise their perceived risk of change and lock them in.

## Conclusions

Large pyramids are indeed engineering marvels, consuming enormous amounts of natural resources. However; they are rarely a personalised and friendly space. They dominate the people who live within them, who feel small, irrelevant and excluded from the grand success of the whole. They are tombs from the past, and it's time to move on.