



THE WISDOM OF JETHRO

Mr. D. A. Bishop is the manager of a farm supply firm located in the central part of the state. Mr. Bishop became manager about eight years ago and since that time the firm has prospered and grown considerably in size. From all outward appearances, Mr. Bishop would be described as an ambitious and progressive agribusiness manager.

A Working Day

This happens to be the busy season for the farm supply industry. As is often the case during the busy season, Mr. Bishop arrives at his office at 7:00 a.m. and spends the next hour reading the previous day's mail and taking care of correspondence. By the time his secretary and staff arrive at 8:00 a.m., Mr. Bishop is hurriedly preparing a series of daily directives for each of his four division supervisors. At 8:30, he meets with the fertilizer bulk plant supervisor to discuss a mechanical problem with the blending equipment which has just occurred. At 9:15, Mr. Bishop calls the assistant manager, the bookkeeper, and the farm store supervisor into his office where he informs them of the preparations which must be made for the annual audit which is to be conducted the following week. This meeting is interrupted by a series of phone calls from the firm's fieldmen (who are complaining about shipment delays) and the meeting is never completed. At 10:30 a.m., he agrees to have coffee with a salesman who wishes to sell the firm a whole new line of irrigation equipment. Before he can reach a decision on this matter, Mr. Bishop is called back to his office at 11 o'clock for an emergency meeting with the firm's legal counsel. He joins the local banker for a working lunch at 12:30 to discuss the working capital problems which

might result from the addition of the new line of irrigation equipment.

Again this meeting is interrupted as Mr. Bishop is asked to return to his office at 1:30 p.m. and return a series of phone calls from local farmers wishing to inquire about the firm's new credit policy. By 2:30, he is busily revising the rough draft of his report to be presented to the local PTA as chairman of the local school board and at 3:30 he interviews a prospective employee wanting a job driving one of the firm's delivery trucks. Shortly after 4:30, Mr. Bishop is asked to visit the site where their new warehouse is being constructed to render a decision on the best height of the loading platform. Returning to his office around 5:15, he spends the next hour reviewing each division's sales and production reports for the previous week. After preparing a list of items which he hopes to take care of the next day, Mr. Bishop leaves the office around 7:00 p.m. for his home, where he will spend the rest of the evening preparing a program for the next meeting of the local Chamber of Commerce.

Fragmented Management

Mr. Bishop does not exist, of course. Both he and his farm supply firm are merely figments of my imagination. However, does the situation described above sound real? Does Mr. Bishop's work routine sound familiar to you? More to the point, do you recognize yourself dashing madly from one meeting to another, only to be interrupted by an endless number of phone calls and persistent demands on your time? If you answered yes to any of these three questions, like many managers of agribusiness firms, you are probably suffering from a chronic case of "management fragmentation."

The symptoms of this ailment are not difficult to uncover. You may discover that you are beginning to segment your work day into an increasing number of short periods of diverse activities. Our hypothetical Mr. Bishop, for example, seemed to be changing his hat about every thirty minutes. During his twelve-hour working day, he attempted to act as 1) an equipment mechanic, 2) an accountant, 3) a lawyer, 4) a financial expert, 5) a sales manager, 6) a construction engineer, 7) a personnel manager, 8) a public relations expert, and 9) a civic servant. By now, this routine may sound so familiar to you, that you may wish to list your own areas of specialty.

An even more obvious symptom is an overcrowded pocket calendar. If you have more than about four meetings scheduled for any one day, chances are you are becoming a fragmented manager. If your working day seems to be increasing from eight hours to nine or even ten, while the volume of unfinished business continues to grow, you may be suffering from management fragmentation. Or, if you find yourself working on an ever-increasing number of problems, yet solving fewer and fewer of them, then fragmented management may be the culprit.

Management fragmentation also appears in more subtle forms. For example, how often have you found yourself saying, "If anything is going to get done around here, I'll have to do it myself"? How many times during the past week have you told an employee, "Before doing anything on this matter, check with me first", or, "I'll handle this matter personally"? Such statements are indicative of a fragmented manager who insists that he be directly involved in every aspect of the firm's activities. Decisions on all matters, regardless how minor they may be, are to be made in his office only, and any employee who practices some individual initiative is quickly reprimanded for having "gone too far" or "stepped out of his bounds".

I could continue with my description of management fragmentation, but by now I'm sure you recognize the situation, i.e. the

fragmented manager is one who 1) over-manages his business, 2) insists on making all the firm's decisions, and 3) refuses to delegate authority to others, thereby finding his work day swamped and himself totally unable to cope with all the supervisory bits and pieces which should have been handled by others in the organization.

The First Management Consultant

The problem of management fragmentation is not new. As a matter of fact, probably the first recorded incident of management fragmentation appears in the Bible. The incident to which I refer surrounds the attempt by Moses to lead his people out of Egypt to the "promised land". Moses was a fragmented manager. He believed that he, alone, was responsible for the movement of his people. Every decision affecting their movement, no matter how minor, was his to make. Every internal dispute was his to mediate. Every civil transgression was his to judge. Every administrative alternative was his to ponder and select. Moses soon found himself struggling with his executive workload. He had neither the time nor the skill to answer all questions, pass all judgments, and render all decisions. Over time, management fragmentation adversely affected Moses' administrative competency and the results were disastrous. Instead of traveling direct from Rameses, Egypt to Shiftim (the promised land), a distance of only 240 miles, the Bible tells of how Moses and his people wandered aimlessly throughout the wilderness of Paran and Sinai for 39 years (arriving at Elath, some 140 miles from their desired destination).

It was in Elath that Moses finally found the solution to his administrative problem. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, could see the difficulty Moses was having trying to over-manage the movement. He correctly associated the symptoms with management fragmentation and offered Moses this advice (and thus became the first management consultant in history):

Jethro said to Moses, "You are not acting wisely. You will surely wear yourself out, and not only yourself but also these people with you. The task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me, and I will give you some advice, that God may be with you. Act as the people's representative before God, bringing to him whatever they have to say. Enlighten them in regard to the decisions and regulations, showing them how they are to live and what they are to do. But you should also look among all the people for able and God-fearing men, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain, and set them as officers over groups of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. Let these men render decisions for the people in all ordinary cases. More important cases they should refer to you, but all the lesser cases they can settle themselves. Thus your burden will be lightened, since they will bear it with you. If you do this, when God gives you orders you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied." (Exodus 18:17-23).

Jethro's advice was accepted by Moses and the appropriate administrative adjustments were made. Because of Jethro's wisdom, management fragmentation was eliminated and the final 140 miles to the promised land were traveled in only nine months.

The Solution

Due to Jethro's wise advice, Moses discovered that the solution to management fragmentation was two-fold: 1) an increased emphasis on structural and operational organization, and 2) a determined willingness by the manager to delegate authority to others.

Organization

As described, both our modern-day Mr. Bishop and Moses were running a "one-man show". While Mr. Bishop had division supervisors, they were little more than figureheads. Moreover, Mr. Bishop's line-of-command was monogenic, i.e. flowing directly from the manager to the employees,

customers, salesmen, etc. In the case of Moses, his organizational structure might have been described as monarchical, i.e. he possessed all administrative power and utilized no assistants or subordinates. Moses organizational chart, had one existed, probably would have resembled that shown in Figure 1. (See Figure 1).

After having accepted the advice of Jethro, however, Moses' organizational chart probably appeared as shown in Figure 2. (See Figure 2).

The generation of a wider-based organizational structure, therefore, is one possible way of combating management fragmentation. A second method relates to operational (as opposed to structural) organization. In other words, a manager must organize his operational work load so as to not only get his work done, but to allow for interruptions. This means that flexibility must be built into your work schedule. To attain this flexibility, you may be forced to schedule gaps in your pocket or desk calendar so as to allow for the unexpected.

Along with these organizational adjustments, the fragmented manager soon learns to establish a set of priorities. In order to cope with this multitude of demands on your time, you must develop a type of sixth sense which will tell you which items must be considered immediately and which may be delayed or brought to others' attention. In establishing this system of priorities, you may find it helpful to evaluate each item by asking yourself the following questions:

1. When is action needed?
2. Who requests the action?
3. How dependent on this action are other elements of the overall business?

Delegation

The second essential ingredient in a manager's ability to maintain control over a fragmented business is, of course, his

Figure 1: Moses' Early Organizational Chart

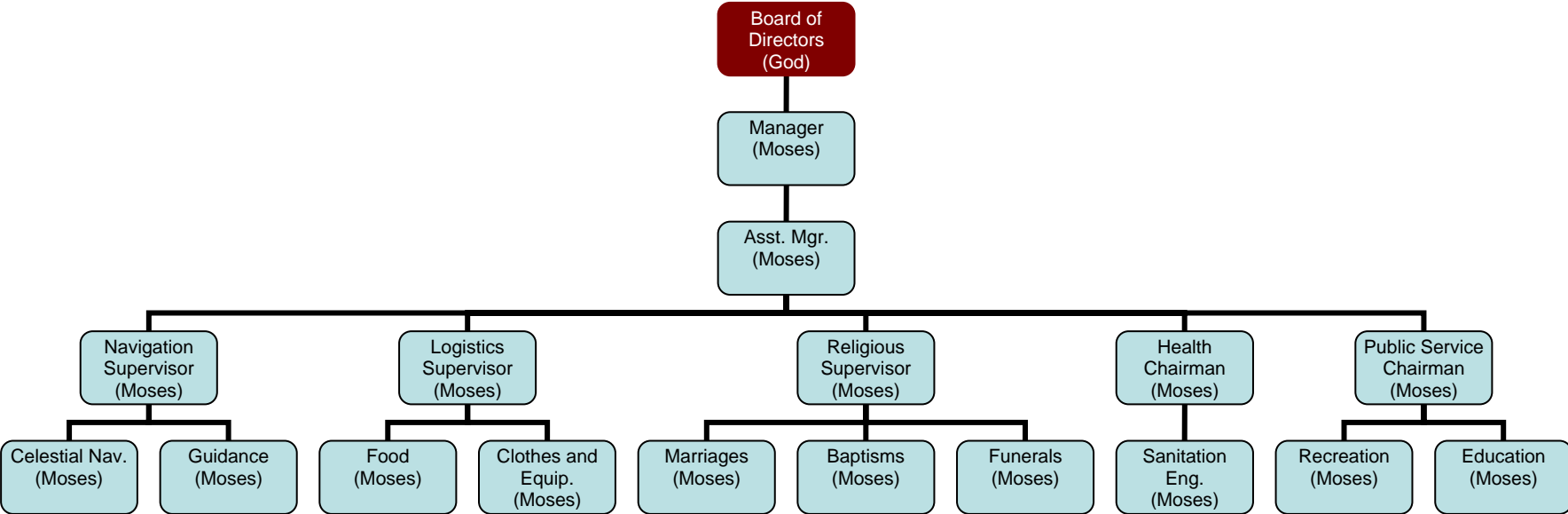
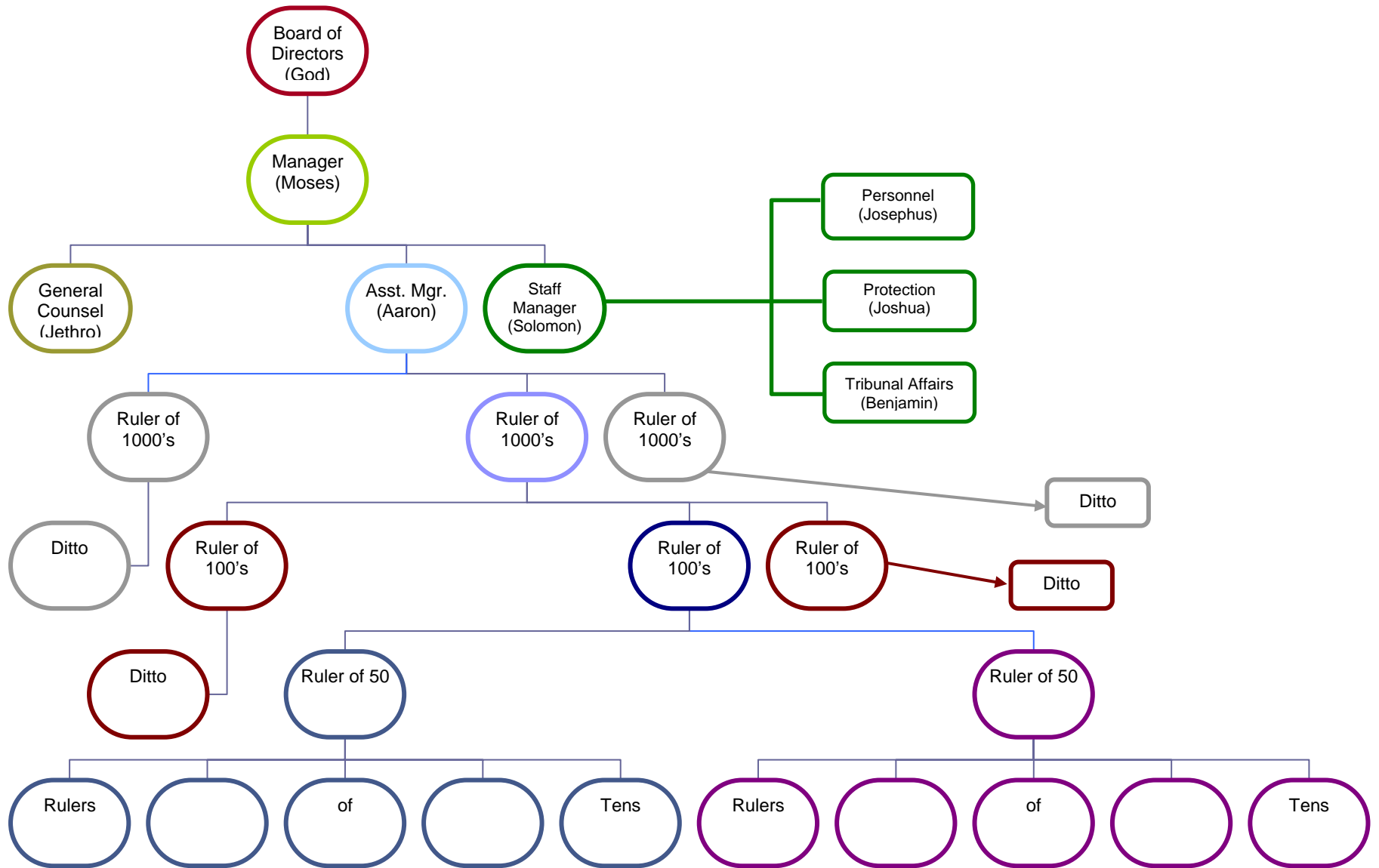


Figure 2: Moses' Final Organizational Chart



willingness to delegate authority. The solution to this problem is to delegate authority within well-defined, logical frameworks so that minor supervisory bits and pieces are taken care of at lower levels on the organizational structure and never given the chance to clutter your desk. You must make sure, however, that the people to whom you delegate authority know exactly what the limits (within which their authority lies) are.

Remember that the delegation of authority does not absolve you from the responsibility for that which has been authorized. As the manager, therefore, you will want to be kept informed on the progress of those programs over which the authority was delegated. You must establish a rapport with the people below you on the organizational structure who are supplying this needed information. Also, you must show an interest (no matter how slight) in the programs, least the subordinates suspect a lack of involvement and return only cursory information for it appraisal. Finally, it is your responsibility as manager, to make sure that the information supplied to you is correct. In this regard, you may have to spot-check the details of a particular problem, following them down through several levels of management.

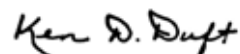
Summary

Management fragmentation is a problem experienced by many agribusiness managers. Its symptoms include: 1) the

haphazard segmentation of a hectic working day into numerous short periods of diverse activities, 2) an attempt by a manager to be directly involved in, and make the decision concerning, all activities of the business regardless of how minor they may be, and 3) a grossly over-crowded work schedule.

Management fragmentation is not a product of modern times. Instead, it is at least as old as the Bible. In fact, the Bible tells of how Jethro became concerned about the problems Moses was having administering over his people. Jethro correctly identified the symptoms and associated them with the problem of management fragmentation. Having isolated the ailment, Jethro then prescribed two cures to Moses: 1) adjust his structural and operational organization, i.e. widen the base of his line-of-command and improve the operational scheduling of his daily work load, and 2) exhibit a willingness to delegate authority to others. You will probably find this prescription as helpful today as it was over 2000 years ago. If you are becoming a fragmented manager, you, too, may benefit from the wisdom of Jethro.

Sincerely,



Ken D. Duft
Extension Marketing Economist