

Sub: Public Administration
Paper II- Administrative Thinkers

MARY PARKER FOLLETT
(1868-1933)

Introduction

Among the many contributors to administrative thought, Mary Parker Follett occupies a prominent place, in what was then largely a man's world. She turned her attention from the traditional subjects of study – the state or the community – to concentrate on the study of industry. In this context, she not only evolved principles of human association and organization specifically in terms of industry, but also convinced large numbers of businessmen of the practicability of these principles in dealing with current problems.

Follett blended theory, fact and ideal admirably. She demonstrated her beliefs by drawing illustrations almost from every walk of life – from the affairs of government, industry and business, home, war and peace, international institutions and wherever men and women lived and worked together. She was a gifted writer with a rare capacity for presenting original ideas with great simplicity and lucidity. Her writings are replete with practical wisdom, deep flashes of intuition, undepartmentalized thinking and an all-pervading spirit of democratic dynamism. Many of those associated with the 'classical' or scientific management movement like Ordway Tead, Henri Fayol, Oliver Sheldon and Lyndall Urwick were influenced by the philosophy of Follett.

Key Words: Constructive Conflict, Integration, Power, Authority and Control, Issue of Orders, Coordination, Leadership

Learning Objectives: The module intends to familiarize students with the contribution of Mary Parker Follett to Administrative Sciences. After reading this module, the students will be able to understand the concepts like power, authority, negotiation, coordination, etc.

Life and Works

Mary Parker Follett was born in Boston in USA in 1868. She had her early education at Thayer Academy in Boston. She then went to Radcliff College where she studied English, Political Economy and History. She also went to Newnham College in Cambridge. After her studies, she developed a keen interest in social administration and social work in Boston. In 1900, she founded the Roxbury Debating Club. In 1909, she became Chairman of the School House Sub-Committee of the Women's Municipal League, Boston. She did social work for women, children and slum dwellers. In 1912, she took to vocational guidance and became a member of the Placement Bureau Committee, Boston. In this capacity, she came in contact with industry. During the period 1915-33, she presented papers on Industrial Organization at annual conferences of business executives. Thus, Follett, who had initially turned her attention to social administration and the solutions of social problems moved smoothly to the realm of business management and administration.

Follett's **major works** are as follows:

1. *The Speaker of the House of Representatives* (1896);

2. *The New State* (1920);
3. *Creative Experience* (1924); and
4. *Dynamic Administration: The Collected Works of Mary Parker Follett* (A collection of her papers, edited by Henry Metcalf and L. Urwick in 1941).

Follett's **major ideas** could be discussed under the following heads:

1. Constructive Conflict;
2. Power, Authority and Control;
3. Coordination; and
4. Leadership.

Constructive Conflict

Conflict and its Resolution

Mary Parker Follett accords an important place to the problems of conflict in her writings. She advances the idea of *“constructive conflict recognizing thereby that conflicts should be regarded as a normal process in any activity of an organization by which socially valuable differences register themselves for the enrichment of all concerned”*. To Follett, conflict is neither good nor bad and has to be considered without passion or ethical pre-judgments.

Conflict is not warfare, but is only an appearance of difference – difference of opinions, of interests not only between employer and employee but also between managers, between directors or wherever differences appear. Conflict is not a wasteful outbreak of incompatibilities, but a normal process by which socially valuable differences register themselves for the enrichment of all concerned. Because of individual differences, conflict is unavoidable in human

organizations. Since conflict is unavoidable, instead of criticizing it as something bad, one should try to capitalize on it, and make use of it to do something good.

To Follett, conflict is a moment in the interaction of desires. Just as there are destructive ways of dealing with such moments, there are also constructive ways. Conflict, at the moment of appearing and focusing of difference, may be a sign of health and a prophecy of progress. Drawing analogies from the universe, she says: *“All polishing is done by friction. We get music from the violin by friction and we left the savage state when we discovered fire through friction.”*

The question then is how to make conflict work constructively. Follett says: There are three ways of resolving a conflict: **Domination**, **Compromise** and **Integration**. **Domination** is a victory of one side over other. This is the easiest way of resolving conflicts. Though it is the easiest for the moment, it is not successful in the long run. But the problem with domination is that, in addition to the discomfort caused to the ‘dominated’, the repressed tendencies tend to rebel against the dominator whenever it is possible. The confrontation will take place again. **Compromise** is generally the way people settle most of their conflicts. In this, each side gives up a little and settles the conflict so that the activity which has been interrupted by the conflicts may go on. Each side involved in the conflict, gives up a part of its ‘desire’ to settle the issue. Though compromise is a widely accepted method of resolving conflicts, rarely people want to compromise, as this involves giving up something.

Integration is the third method of resolving conflicts. Here, two desires are integrated, and neither side needs to sacrifice its desires. Follett considers that

integration as a method of dealing with conflict has some advantages when compared to compromise:

- Compromise does not create but only deals with the existing, whereas Integration creates something new, leads to invention and to the emergence of new values.
- Integration leads to the use of better techniques.
- Integration saves time and resources.
- Integration goes to the root of the problem and puts an end to the conflict permanently.

Steps to Achieving Integration

Follett also discusses the ways of achieving integration:

- (a) The first step towards achieving Integration is to bring differences into the open, instead of suppressing them. *"We cannot hope to integrate our differences,"* she asserts, *"unless we know what they are."* Therefore, what is needed is to uncover, identify and understand the real issues involved in a conflict. This involves finding out the significant, rather than the dramatic features involved in a conflict or controversy.
- (b) The second step is the breaking up of the whole, i.e., to consider the demands of both sides involved in the conflict and to break them into their constituent parts involves the examination of symbols, use of which are unavoidable in organizational work. Examination of symbols, in turn, involves a careful scrutinizing of the language used, to see what it really

means. To Follett, all language used is symbolic, and therefore, one should be on one's guard to know as to what is being symbolized. Integration not only involves breaking up of the whole but sometimes one has to do the opposite. It is important to articulate the whole demand, the real demand which is being obscured by miscellaneous minor claims or by ineffective presentation.

(c) Anticipation of conflict is the third step. Anticipation of conflict does not mean the avoidance of conflict but responding to it differently. To Follett, integration is like a game of chess. Anticipation of response is by itself not enough; there is need for preparation for response as well.

Obstacles to Integration

1. Integration requires high intelligence, keen perception and discrimination, and a brilliant inventiveness. It is always easier to fight than to suggest better ways of doing a job. As long as intelligence and inventiveness are not there, resolving conflicts through integration would be difficult.
2. Another obstacle is people's habit of enjoying domination. To many, integration is a tame affair; it does not give them the thrill of conquest nor the satisfaction of victory. Follett says that the people with such habit patterns always prefer domination to integration.
3. A third obstacle to integration is that often the problems are theorized, instead of taking them as proposed activities or practical issues needing immediate solution. Quite often, people, forgetting that disagreements will

disappear if they stop theorizing, go on theorizing the problem on hand. Follett says that intellectual agreement alone does not solve conflicts and bring integration.

4. Language used is the fourth obstacle to integration. The language used must be favourable to reconciliation and should not arouse antagonism and perpetuate the conflict. Sometimes language used even creates new disputes which were not there earlier.
5. A fifth obstacle to integration is the undue influence exerted by the leaders.
6. Finally, the most important of all obstacles to integration is lack of training. Follett says that in most cases there is a tendency to 'push through' or to 'force through' the plans previously arrived at, based on preconceived notions. Therefore, she pleads that there should be courses to teach the art of cooperative thinking, to master the technique of integration, both for workers and managers.

Power, Authority and Control

Follett gives special attention to the problems of **Power, Authority and Control**. She reveals profound, penetrating and strikingly original insights in her analysis of power. She defines **Power** as "*the ability to make things happen, to be a causal agent, to initiate change*". Power is the capacity to produce intended effects. It is an instinctive urge inherent in all human beings. She makes a distinction between '**Power-Over**' and '**Power-With**'. The former may tend to be 'coercive-power' while the latter is a jointly developed 'coactive-power'.

Power-With is superior to Power-Over, as it is a self-developing entity which promotes better understanding, reduces friction and conflict and

encourages cooperative endeavour. However, Follett does not think it possible to get rid of power-over, but thinks that one should try to reduce it. This can be accomplished by integrating the desires, obeying the law of situation and through functional unity. In a functional unity, each has his/her functions and s/he should have the authority and responsibility which go with that function. Follett also believes that power can never be delegated or handed out or wrenched from someone as it is the result of knowledge and ability. But, she feels, we can *create* conditions for the development of power.

Follett defines **Authority** as vested power – the right to develop and exercise power. Authority in terms of status and the subordination of one to another, offends human dignity and may cause undesirable reactions and friction. Therefore, it cannot be the basis of organization. According to her, authority stems from the task being performed and is derived from the situation, and suggests that *function is the true basis from which authority is derived*. Therefore, she says that central authority i.e., derivation of authority from the Chief Executive should be replaced by **Authority of Function** in which each individual has final authority within the allotted functions. She feels that authority can be conferred on others and such conferment is not delegation. She expresses the clear terms that ‘delegation of authority’ should be an ‘obsolete expression’. Like authority, responsibility also flows from the function and situation. Therefore, one should ask “*For what is one responsible?*” than “*To whom is s/he responsible?*” Follett also believes in the pluralistic concept of responsibility or cumulative responsibility.

Control, like Authority and Responsibility, is an important aspect to achieve organizational goals. Unlike classical thinkers. Follett believes in **Fact-Control** rather than man-control and in **Correlated-Control** than super-imposed control. Since facts vary from situation to situation, control should depend upon the facts of each situation, instead of superiors controlling subordinates. Similarly, situations are too complex for central control to be meaningfully effective. Therefore, Follett suggests that control mechanisms should be correlated at many places in the organizational structure. If organizations are to be well integrated, unified and coordinated, control should be designed and developed as a part of the unifying process. A unified organization is a self-regulating and self-directing organism. In all such organizations, Follett feels, control tends to be self-control.

Exercising Power, Authority and Control: The Issue of Orders

Follett examines at length the question of giving **Orders** and the principles underlying the different ways of giving orders. She says that there are four important steps in giving orders: (1) a conscious attitude – realize the principles through which it is possible to act on in any matter; (2) a responsible attitude to decide which of the principles we should act on; (3) an experimental attitude – try experiments and watch results; (4) pooling the results.

Follett says that most people, without even knowing the different principles that underlie giving orders, give orders every day. To her, to know the principles that underlie any given activity is to take a conscious attitude. After recognizing the different principles, one must think of what principles s/he should act on and then s/he should give orders in accordance with those principles. To give orders

based on principles is a responsible attitude. Trying experiments, noting whether they are successful or a failure and analyzing as to why they are successful or a failure is taking an experimental attitude. Finally, one should pool the experiences of all and see to what extent and in what manner the methods of giving orders can be changed if the existing methods are found inadequate.

Many people think that giving orders is very simple and expect that they would be obeyed without question. But, in practice, issuing of orders is surrounded by many difficulties. Past life, training, experience, emotions, beliefs and prejudices form certain habits of mind, which the psychologists call 'habit-patterns', 'action-patterns' and 'motor-sets'. Unless these habit-patterns and certain mental attitudes are changed, one cannot really change people.

Before giving orders, the employer should also consider the ways and means of forming the 'habits' among the employees to ensure acceptance of the orders. This involves four important steps: first, the officials should be made to see the desirability of a new method; second, the rules of the office should be so changed as to make it possible for the officials to adopt the new method; third, a few people should be convinced in advance to adopt the new method to set an example. The last step is what psychologists call intensifying the attitude to be released. This will prepare the way for the acceptance of orders.

Follett then turns her attention to the *environment* of giving orders and says that the response to the orders depends upon the place and the circumstances under which orders are given. She says that the "*strength of favourable response to an order is in inverse ratio to the distance the order*

travels". Efficiency is always in danger of being affected whenever the long-distance order is substituted for face-to-face suggestion.

The *manner* of giving orders is also important. Alleged harassing, tyrannical and overbearing conduct of officials is an important reason for many industrial controversies. Treating men without regard to their feelings and self-respect would result in strikes and strained industrial relations. The language used often arouses wrong behavioural patterns. The more one is bossed over, the more one develops opposition to bossing.

Depersonalising Orders

From the foregoing it is evident that giving of orders is a complicated process. Therefore, either people stop giving orders, or become 'authoritarian' to ensure compliance to their orders. To avoid too much of bossism in giving orders or giving no orders at all, Follett suggests **depersonalizing the orders**. This involves a study of the problem to discover the 'law of the situation' and obeying it by all concerned. One should not give orders to another, but both should agree to take orders from the situation. If orders are a part of the situation, the question of someone giving and someone receiving orders does not arise and both take the orders from the situation. Follett says that two heads of departments do not give orders to each other. Each studies the situation and decisions are made as the situation demands. Depersonalizing orders, however, does not mean that one should not exercise authority. It only means exercise of authority of the situation. She gives the example of a boy who says no and then gets a pail of water for his mother. In this case, he resents the command, but recognizes the demand of the situation.

Follett also observes that the situation is never static, it always develops and evolves. Therefore, the order too should never be static; but should always keep up with the situation. The external orders can never keep pace with the situations and only those drawn fresh from the situation can do so. Therefore, Follett says, the order must always be integral to the situation.

Coordination

To Follett, planning is a scheme of self-adjusting and self-coordinating the various and varying interests. The process of self-adjusting is possible only through **Coordination**. To Follett, coordination “implies harmonious ordering of parts”. To achieve coordination, she postulates four principles of organization:

1. *Coordination as the reciprocal relating of all factors in a situation:* All factors in a situation have to be related to one another and these inter-relationships themselves must be taken into account.
2. *Coordination by direct contact:* Responsible people in the organization must be in direct contact with one another irrespective of their position in the hierarchy. She believes that horizontal communication is as important as vertical chain of command.
3. *Coordination in the early stages:* All the people concerned should be involved at the stage of policy formulation itself than being involved only at the implementation stage. Such participation at the early stages will benefit the organization through increased motivation and morale.

4. *Coordination as a continuing process*: Follett emphasizes the need for a permanent machinery to achieve coordination from planning to activity and from activity to further planning. The advantages of such a machinery, Follett feels would be immense. Similarly she emphasizes the importance of information based on continuous research. The information itself would be a form of control, for there would be a tendency to act in accordance with the information given, if it were accepted as accurate.

Leadership

Follett gives considerable attention and discusses at length the process of Leadership. She believes that the old ideas of leadership are changing because of the changes in the concept of human relations, and developments in management. To Follett, a leader is not the President of the organization or Head of the Department, but one *“who can see all around a situation, who sees it as related to certain purposes and policies, who sees it evolving into the next situation, who understands how to pass from one situation to another”*.

According to her, a leader is *“the man who can energize his group, who knows how to encourage initiative, how to draw from all what each has to give”*. He is *“the man who can show that the order is integral to the situation”*. Leadership goes to the man who can grasp the essentials of an experience and, as we say, *“can see it as a whole”* and *“to whom the total inter-relatedness is most clear”*. He is the expression of a harmonious and effective unity which he has helped to form and which he is able to make a going concern. Such people, Follett feels, are found not just at the apex but throughout the organization. According to Follett,

coordination, definition of purpose and anticipation are the three functions of the leader. A leader has also to organize experience of the group and transform it into power. Follett stresses that leaders are not only born but can be made through education and training in organization and management.

Follett distinguishes between three different types of leadership: Leadership of Position, Leadership of Personality, and Leadership of Function. In the first, the leader holds a position of formal authority and in the second, one becomes a leader because of his forceful personality. One who holds both position and personality can 'lead' much more easily. But in modern organizations, it is not the persons of formal authority or of personality who 'lead' but those who possess expert knowledge. They exercise leadership because others are influenced by their judgments. *"The man possessing the knowledge demanded by a certain situation tends in the best managed business, and other things being equal, becomes the leader at that moment."*

Thus leadership goes to the man with the knowledge of the situation, who understands its total significance and who can see it through. Such experts can give orders even to those of higher rank. Leadership of function is inherent in the job. Though personality plays a large part in leadership, Follett believes that leadership of function is becoming more important than leadership of personality. Follett also believes that the success of any organization depends on its being "sufficiently flexible to allow the leadership of function to operate fully – to allow the men and women with the knowledge and the technique to control the situation". Thus, Follett has called attention to the emergence in American life of

“leadership by function”, long before the term “Situational Leadership” came into use.

Contribution/Evaluation of Mary Parker Follett

Follett provided several contributions to the development of management, the most important being her managerial philosophy with its emphasis on the spirit of democratic dynamism and human behavior. She maintained that attitudinal change is required for the integrative process to work properly. Individuals must develop a cooperative attitude that fosters a search for integrative solutions to conflict and aspire only to exercise, ‘power-with’ rather than grasp for ‘power-over’.

Appreciating her contribution, George Claude writes: *“Mary Parker Follett was a true management philosopher, a pioneer who helped span the gap between the mechanistic approach of Taylor and our contemporary approach emphasizing human behavior”*.

Metcalf and Urwick observe: *“Her conceptions were in advance of her time. They are still in advance of current thinking. But they are a gold-mine of suggestions for anyone who is interested in the problems of establishing and maintain human cooperation in the conduct of an enterprise”*.

Indeed, much of what Follett wrote has become accepted and may now seem commonplace. Comparing Follett with Florence Nightingale (the founder of modern nursing), Bertram Gross comments: *“But she was no less an innovator,*

and her intellectual horizons were much broader". Follett was again the first management thinker who endeavoured to build a theory for the professionalization of business management.

Pugh, Hickson and Hinings have this to say about Follett: *"The core of her contribution is the proposition that in a democratic society, the primary task of management is to so arrange the situation that people cooperate readily of their own accord".*

While a few writers on organization label Follett as a 'classical' thinker, others criticize her stating that 'there is nothing classical in her ideas'. But it must be stated that Follett herself criticized the classical theory of management for its one-sidedness, mechanism, and for ignoring psychological aspects.

But her own ideas on various aspects of administration and management were not free from criticisms. She was criticized for ignoring the social nature or the processes involved in the management of organizations. *"She threw all real social, class conflicts off the scale and considered only psychological conflicts rising mainly from lack of understanding, misapprehensions and differences in the personnel qualities. Her ideas on integration were criticized as being illusory."* (Gvishiani).

She was also criticized for not interpreting the social content of organization scientifically. Baker observed that Follett was never a systematic writer; she threw out interesting ideas more or less randomly and, therefore, the thread of consistency was hard to find and harder to follow. Not all her readers would see where her thoughts would lead them. Therefore, it was observed that

her valuable ideas and useful recommendations do not conform to a theoretically well-founded and integrated system.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, Follett's contribution to administrative theory is "seminal and indeed prophetic"; her ideas in the realm of conflict, integration, coordination, control, authority and leadership convince everyone about the validity and justification of the multi-dimensional focus of her universalistic approach. As Metcalf and Urwick have observed: *"Her conceptions were in advance of her time. They are still in advance of current thinking. But they are a gold-mine of suggestions for anyone who is interested in the problems of establishing and maintaining human cooperation in the conduct of an enterprise."*

