

Promoting Learning

by Dr. Marvin Marshall

THE POWER OF HIERARCHIES

This article first appeared in the September, 2002, issue of the Gazette on <teachers.net>.

*It's not only what a hierarchy is.
It's what it does.*

A hierarchy is a series of stages in which, the higher the rank, the greater the level of development. Examples of hierarchies are:

- Abraham Maslow's **Hierarchy of Needs**
- Jean Piaget's **Hierarchy of Cognitive Development**
- Lawrence Kohlberg's **Hierarchy of Moral Development**

The hierarchy used in the ***Raise Responsibility System*** (<http://teachers.net/gazette/APR02/marshall.html>) not only engenders a **desire** to behave at the highest level, it also is significant because of what else it does.

Four highly significant advantages are listed first. Additional advantages follow.

- The hierarchy separates the act from the actor, the deed from the doer, irresponsible behavior from a good person.
Separation is critical; otherwise, students are defensive.
- The hierarchy brings attention to students that they are constantly making choices--conscious and nonconscious (habitual).
- The hierarchy allows young people to understand and deal with the power of peer pressure.
- The hierarchy fosters intrinsic motivation so students **want** to behave responsibly.
- The hierarchy fosters character education without ever mentioning values, ethics, or morals (a concern in some communities).

Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "The human mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions." When young people become aware of

levels of social development, they become conscious of social responsibility in their own behaviors and in relationships with others.

The hierarchy **serves as a means of communication**. It offers young people and adults the same conceptual vocabulary. The vocabulary brings clarity of understanding and assists communications both between teacher and student and among students themselves.

The hierarchy encourages **students themselves to maintain an environment conducive to learning**, rather than always relying on the teacher. Members of the classroom take on leadership to retain decorum. When students help each other to maintain an atmosphere conducive to learning they are taking a major step in creating a learning community. A community is most successful when members look to themselves to solve problems.

The hierarchy **raises awareness for responsible citizenship**. Our society is based on great autonomy for its citizens. However, citizenship, assumes values such as responsibility, respect, caring, fairness, and trustworthiness--the values that transcend divisions of race, creed, politics, gender, and wealth. These values are fostered in the hierarchy and are reinforced in the examples students create for level D--democracy.

The hierarchy **raises awareness for individual responsibility**. Teaching for democratic living requires more than just choosing when to conform and when not to conform. When peer pressure is so compelling as to prompt people to do something that is personally or socially irresponsible, just knowing the levels of social development can have a liberating and responsibility-producing effect. For example, a problem in many middle and high schools relates to both studying and doing home assignments. Many students do not study or complete learning assignments because such effort is discouraged in the peer culture. The hierarchy can be a motivator in this regard. Students begin to realize that not turning in homework assignments or not studying because of peer pressure is level C behavior. After exposure to the concepts, students begin to evaluate the level of their choices. Internalizing the levels can do much to foster desired behavior and individual responsibility.

Using the hierarchy **calls attention to the fact that people are constantly making choices** and that students choose their own level of behavior, consciously or nonconsciously (habitually). Students learn that their behaviors are self-chosen, a product of their decisions. They learn that they have a choice in how they respond in a situation, to a stimulus, and even to an urge.

The hierarchy **empowers young people**. It sets the groundwork for students to be able to analyze and correct their own behaviors, to self-correct. It shows students they can be in control of their lives, be agents of their own empowerment, and can **resist the victimhood mentality**.

The hierarchy **encourages students to achieve the highest level of behavior**. The very nature of a hierarchy serves as an inspiration. Young people have an internal desire to be as competent and successful as they can be. We deprive them of opportunities if we do not expose them to possibilities. Using the hierarchy fosters internal motivation so students **want** to act responsibly.

The hierarchy **encourages mature decision making**. Adolescent students are looking for roles, more than goals. Exposing young people to the levels has a natural effect of encouraging them to think about long-term decisions. This is a significant consideration since so much advertising, peer pressure, and behavior of young people is aimed at instant gratification rather than at fostering character development and growth.

The **hierarchy serves to distinguish between the inappropriate behavior and the person who acts inappropriately**. This point is so critical that it bears repeating and emphasizing. A fundamental advantage of the hierarchy is that it naturally accomplishes what adults talk about but have a most difficult time in accomplishing, namely, separating a person's behavior from the person himself. For example, reflect on the last time you were evaluated. Did you separate what the evaluator was telling you about your **performance** from you as a **person**? While the evaluation session was taking place, were you aware that the supervisor was not really talking about you personally, just about your on-the-job actions? My surveys with hundreds of teachers and administrators have indicated that only an extremely small number of people consciously separate themselves from their behavior during an evaluation. If the separation is difficult for adults, imagine how much more difficult it is for young people. Even though we try desperately to make it clear to a young person that we are not criticizing the student as a person--that we are just not approving inappropriate behavior--it is extremely difficult for a young person to perceive the difference. Teaching the hierarchy makes this challenging task quite easy. We never talk about the student's behavior; we only talk about the **level** of behavior.

The hierarchy focuses on **labeling behavior, not people**. Labeling people often has negative overtones and is not conducive to building relationships. In contrast, labeling a description is far less antagonizing. One summer day on a

long drive, my wife was describing a story she was writing. She was, in effect, thinking aloud. After what appeared to me to be a somewhat lengthy pause, I turned on an audio tape cassette which was already in position to be played. After listening to it for a minute, I ejected the tape, turned to my wife, and asked, "Is everything O.K.?" She answered, "Sure, you're from Mars!" (alluding to John Gray's book, *Men Are from Mars. Women Are from Venus*). We had often discussed natural differences between males and females and were familiar with John Gray's metaphors of men being from Mars (action-oriented) and women being from Venus (relations-oriented). By labeling my action as Martian, she dispersed in a matter of seconds what otherwise might have created great tension. She knew where I was coming from, and I realized my behavior was inappropriate. It was the understanding communicated by labeling the type of behavior that allowed us to continue on a pleasant ride. The important learning from this episode is that we had a common vocabulary; we were both familiar with the Mars and Venus metaphors. We understood that reference was made to a type of behavior, not a personal attack on the person. My wife did not tell me I was a rude person; she merely referred to my actions as being Martian. I did not feel personally attacked. Labeling the behavior was non-confrontational, aided communication, assisted understanding, and encouraged readjustment.

The hierarchy fosters understanding about **internal and external incentives**. Understanding the difference between an external incentive and an internal incentive can have a significant impact on motivation. It is common for elementary and middle school teachers to offer incentives for students to behave. When these students move on to a different teacher, they often ask what will be given them if they behave properly. Students are accustomed to receiving something for good behavior. The incentive has become getting the reward, rather than commitment to appropriate behavior. In this process, students have fallen under the control of the external reward at the expense of autonomy. The paradox is that we want to assist students to become self-disciplined, independent problem solvers; yet, external incentives set up students to be dependent. Students quickly understand that external incentives are really bribes to manipulate their behavior. Although they are influenced by incentives, they learn that they can choose to be or not to be motivated by them.

The hierarchy leads to **improved self-esteem**. After students have discussed the differences between external rewards and internal satisfaction, the stage is set for understanding self-esteem. Teachers give external rewards such as certificates and praise in attempts to build self-esteem. However, according to *Toward A State of Esteem, The Final Report of the California Task Force to Promote Self-esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility*,

The building blocks of self-esteem are skills. The more skillful a person, the more likely he or she will be able to cope in life and situations. By fostering skills of personal and social responsibility, schools can help students increase their behavioral options. (California State Department of Education, 1990, p. 64)

Self-esteem is closely related to self-satisfaction. A person who is satisfied with a task has a tendency to repeat it. The more often one completes a task successfully, the more proficient he becomes in it. This reinforcement builds feelings of competency and self-worth, critical elements of self-esteem. In short, self-esteem is the result of feelings of competency. Rather than being the result of external rewards, these feelings are the result of internal thoughts—often resulting from an internal feeling of satisfaction.

Students learn that **their behavior plays a role in determining how they want their teacher to relate to them.** Neither A (anarchy) nor B (bullying/bothering/bossing) are appropriate or acceptable behavioral classroom levels. Behavior at either of these levels encourages a **controlling reaction from the teacher.** When students operate on these levels, they are telling the teacher, "Use authority on us." When students understand the levels, a teacher can stop an unpleasant situation with a simple question, "Do you want me to become a level B teacher today?" Given the choice, students invariably say, "No we will be on level C." What a nice and simple way to resolve the situation! In addition and most important, students soon learn that when the class operates on levels C or D, the class encourages autonomy and supportive behavior on the part of the teacher.

Teaching the hierarchy **fosters student self-management.** While learning the concepts, young people are also learning the underlying value system. For example, "bullying," which implies selfishness, is at a lower level of social development than "conformity." Conformity, which implies order and fairness, must prevail before democracy can exist. Democracy calls for responsibility and doing the right thing--**whether or not someone else is watching.**

Teaching the hierarchy is the foundation of *The Raise Responsibility System* because it naturally **promotes internal motivation so students want to be responsible--both individually and socially.**

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