



Mary Parker Follett was a groundbreaking management theorist whose ideas were ahead of her time. Her theories bridged the gap between classical management theories, which focused on structure and efficiency, and humanistic theories, which emphasized the human element.

Mary Parker Follett defines management as 'the art of getting things done through people.' The philosophy she posits is based on the idea of shared power structures inside organizations. She advocates flatter organizational structures, informal networks and lateral processes. She recognizes the holistic nature of community and advances the idea of 'reciprocal relationships' in understanding the dynamic aspects of the individual in relationship to others. Follett advocates the principle of what she terms as 'integration', or non-coercive power-sharing, based on the use of her concept of 'power with' rather than 'power over'. She saw power as an expandable force rather than a limited one.

Management theorist Warren Bennis said of Follett's work, "Just about everything written today about leadership and organizations comes from Mary Parker Follett's writings and lectures."

Core Philosophy: The Social Nature of Organization and the Group Process

Follett's philosophy was a direct critique of classical theory, which she viewed as:

- Mechanistic: Ignoring the psychological element within an organization.
- Dehumanizing: Overlooking the human element and treating individuals as cogs in a machine.

She contended that classical theorists missed a fundamental truth: "An organization is a social entity," and its "processes are social processes." Follett believed that human nature is inherently social. Individuals find purpose and identity through group interactions, which naturally leads to the formation of groups and the start of group processes.

A Social Animal

Follett's philosophy places the group process at the heart of social and organizational analysis, viewing humans as inherently social animals who derive a profound sense of identity, purpose, and function from their interactions within groups.

- The group is not merely an aggregation of individuals but a coherent, dynamic entity that influences individual ideas and actions, fostering mutual compatibility, harmony, and collective potential.
- Central to this is the reciprocal relationship between the individual and society, where neither exists independently; individuals shape society while being shaped by it, leading to social unity as "a whole a making in the interweaving of individual activities."
- Follett's core concern was how groups produce outcomes that isolated individuals could never achieve, guided by the law of interpenetration—where members act as reciprocal conditioning forces, evoking new forms through the synthesis of differences—and the doctrine of wholes. This doctrine describes the group as a dynamic entity born from human interaction, aligning the interests of the whole with those of the individuals through the synthesis of ideas, actions, and feelings.
- This process evolves from interaction, culminating in a sense of sympathy where individuals recognize their own interests in the group's, ultimately seeking freedom for all through the authority of the whole and each member's unique contributions.

Influenced by her early social work in Boston's diverse immigrant communities, Follett contrasted this with Taylor's efficiency-focused individualism, emphasizing relationships as the key to liberating latent potentials, as she wrote in *Creative Experience*: "The essence of experience, the law of relation, is reciprocal freeing; here is the rock and the substance of the human spirit."

- In an Indian context, this mirrors the operations of cooperatives like Amul in Gujarat, where farmers interweave their individual efforts into collective marketing strategies, synthesizing diverse interests—such as those of small-scale versus large-scale producers—through interpenetration to create economic unity and empowerment, much like Follett's vision of emergent group wholes.
- Similarly, women's self-help groups under India's National Rural Livelihood Mission exemplify reciprocal freeing, enabling participants to access resources and build enterprises through group identity and shared purpose.

Law of Interpenetration

This is the process of interaction within a group, where ideas and opinions are exchanged.

Law of the Synthesis

Through the process of interpenetration, a synthesis of ideas, opinions, and activities occurs, leading to the formation of group goals and a collective identity. This synthesis is the basis of effective group functioning. Follett saw a group not as a mere collection of individuals, but as a coherent entity with mutually compatible ideas and activities. She emphasized the interdependence of individuals and groups: the interest of the group is tied to the individual, and the interest of the individual is fulfilled by the group. This led to her famous statement, "The home of my soul lies in the state."

II. Critique of Democracy and Advocacy for "Co-action"; The State, Democracy, and Law

Follett was critical of representative democracy, viewing it as an "**outgrowth of individualism**" that often subordinates individual interests to powerful, arbitrary interests. She considered it a "rationalization of arbitrary exercise of power," where people's liberty "**vanishes into the ballot box.**"

Instead, she advocated for a true democracy where people are directly involved in governance and "consume their own policy." She championed associative democracy, where individuals actively participate in decision-making through groups and associations. Extending her group process ideas to broader societal structures, Follett conceptualized the state as an organic extension of group dynamics at a higher level, representing the highest expression of social life where individuals achieve fulfillment.

- The true state emerges in a democratic framework with full participation and a federal structure rooted in neighborhood groups, which promote understanding through acquaintance, constant interaction, and diverse contacts, outperforming self-selected groups in serving greater purposes.
- Sovereignty derives from the group process and integration principles, allowing the state to express and fulfill individuals, as Follett poetically described: **"the home of my soul is in the State."**
- Its primary function is the moral ordering of social relationships, with law serving dual roles—restraining to protect interests while positively broadening and deepening them, deriving authority from the community and integrating justice as a vital part of the social process.
Real democracy, for Follett, hinges on substantive participation by the masses within a federalist political structure, dismissing reliance on majority rule, party organizations, and crowd laws as inadequate or even counterproductive, instead aiming to forge unity and collective will through creative interpersonal relationships and interpenetration of ideas.
- An active, responsible citizenry cultivates power via the interplay of daily concrete activities, inspiring creativity and allowing democracy to thrive, with the small group as its core—"the democratic soul is born in the group," as noted in *The New State*.
- Leaders in this system release group energy, unite efforts toward shared purposes, and incorporate expert advice while maintaining popular control and centralized responsibility, famously advising that the "expert should be on tap but not on top."

Follett critiqued **ballot box democracy** for neglecting individual interests, arguing that while born from individualism, it has been undermined by party domination and the entanglement of business with politics, inhibiting genuine participation and prioritizing parochial interests under the guise of majority rule.

- This form relies on numerical strength rather than authentic unions of interests, grounded in the law of the crowd and consent—where the few decide and the many assent—serving as a rationalization for arbitrary power; instead, co-action is essential, and progressives err by overemphasizing suffrage extensions without deeper engagement.

In India, this aligns with the federal structure and Panchayati Raj system of village councils, which facilitate substantive participation by integrating local neighborhood group interests into national democracy, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic when community health workers like ASHA volunteers self-organized through interpenetration to build collective responses, transcending the limitations of urban ballot-box elections dominated by parties. The Gram Sabha and Ward Committees in India are excellent examples of Follett's concept of associative democracy. These local bodies empower citizens to directly participate in decision-making regarding local development, sanitation, and resource allocation, rather than relying solely on elected representatives.

Law of Consent vs. Law of Co-action

- Law of Consent: The idea behind representative democracy, where the ruled have given "consent" to the rulers to govern.
- Law of Co-action: The principle of associative democracy, where individuals collaborate and participate directly in the governing process.

Follett believed that organizations become successful when members and the organization enjoy a mutually complementary relationship. She rejected the monocratic (rule by one) and monologic (one-way communication) processes of classical theory, advocating for democratic and dialogic (two-way communication) processes.

III. Follett's Contribution to Administrative Aspects

Although she didn't present a single coherent theory of administration, Follett's contributions to various aspects of management—leadership, conflict, power, responsibility, and coordination—were groundbreaking.

A. Leadership

Follett's ideas on leadership were a clear departure from classical, hierarchical views. She categorized leadership into three types:

1. Leadership by Position: Leadership by virtue of occupying a particular position in the hierarchy. This was the view advocated by classical theorists, who assumed that a hierarchy of position implied a hierarchy of knowledge and competence.

Follett rejected this, arguing that positional leaders can suffer from a lack of knowledge or competence, leading to failure.

Eg. Newly appointed SP in a Naxalite affected tribal district. Follett would argue that the field worker, in that situation, is the true functional leader.

2. Leadership by Personality: A leader is someone who, by virtue of their personal qualities, can command a following, irrespective of their formal position.

Follett also rejected this as impractical, as it would require the superior to surrender their ego, and it's not a sustainable model for an organization.

3. Leadership by Function: The leader is the person who, due to their specific functional competence and the demands of the situation, is best equipped to lead at that moment. This is a dynamic form of leadership.

Mechanism: Circular Response: Follett introduced the concept of "circular response"—an iterative, dialogic process where knowledge, skill, and competence are transferred from workers to the superior. This enables the positional leader to acquire **functional** competence. It transforms the decision-making process from "I decided" to a collective "we decided," making workers feel in control and preserving their sense of freedom. This is based on the **"Law of Co-action."**

Future Organisations and Diffused Leadership

Follett envisioned the future of organizations relying on widely diffused leadership rather than concentrated authority, redefining a leader not as the positional president or department head but as one who energizes the group, encourages initiative, draws contributions from all, and demonstrates how order is inherent to the situation through superior knowledge of navigating transitions. Key functions include coordination, defining purpose, and anticipation, with leaders potentially "made" through education in human behavior, aligning with thinkers like Fayol and Sheldon.

- She favors functional leadership as paramount in modern organizations, which must be flexible enough to allow those with situational expertise to lead momentarily, as "the man possessing the knowledge demanded for a certain situation tends... to become a leader at that moment." This preceded the situational leadership approach, emphasizing that successful leaders envision unrealized possibilities, as in her quote: "The most successful leader... sees another picture not yet actualized."
- In India, Mahatma Gandhi's functional leadership during the independence movement energized diverse groups through situational knowledge, such as the Salt March, integrating interests via non-violent evocation in contrast to positional colonial rule.

B. Conflict

Classical theory viewed conflict as dangerous, wasteful, and a sign of a flawed organizational structure. Follett, however, believed conflict was inevitable, not a weakness.

Follett: Conflict is a **normal difference of opinion**, not an inherent danger. It's an opportunity for constructive change, provided it is managed creatively. Follett regarded conflict as an **unavoidable aspect** of group dynamics due to differing interests among members, yet she reframed it not as destructive warfare but as a constructive opportunity for growth, stating in *Creative Experience* that it is "not necessarily a wasteful outbreak of incompatibilities but a normal process by which socially valuable differences register themselves for the enrichment of all concerned."

- Society's primary task, in her view, is to harmonize dissonance and unity from diversity, assimilating differences into a larger whole via interpenetration and interweaving of ideas and actions.
- Conflicts arise from the distinct nature of human behavior, appearing in various forms such as differences between employers and employees or among managers.

She proposed three strategies for managing conflict:

1. Domination: One party's opinion prevails through coercion and the use of power.

Follett rejected this because it creates resentment, suppresses differences, and fails to address the root cause of the conflict. It makes the organization more conflict-prone in the long run.

Domination involves coercion or persuasion, offering a quick victory for one side but risking repressed tendencies—drawing from Freudian psychology—that could rebound against the dominator, ultimately stifling long-term harmony.

2. Compromise: A mechanism where both parties gain and lose, with no one fully winning or losing.

Follett considered this a temporary solution that avoids the issue rather than addressing it. The opportunity for new ideas is lost, and the conflict is likely to resurface later. Compromise requires each party to concede elements for peace, a common method yet often resisted due to ego clashes or entrenched positions, leaving issues partially unresolved.

3. Integration: A constructive, dialogic process where conflicting ideas are confronted openly and honestly. A synthesis of ideas is created, leading to a new solution that satisfies all parties. This is based on the principle of "evocation," which means allowing people to express their true opinions.

Follett championed this as the only true "win-win" strategy. It addresses the root cause of the conflict, increases acceptance and commitment from all parties, and makes the organization less conflict-prone in the future. Integration, however, transforms conflicts into creative syntheses where differing interests confront rather than oppose each other, resulting in a harmonious marriage of differences that synthesizes competition and cooperation for innovative, dynamic solutions—not permanent fixes but equilibria open to further disruptions as moments for new interactions.

This is achieved through circular response, characterized by reciprocal, non-linear relationships where individuals both affect and are affected by their social environment, leading to interpenetration and evocation—the release of latent capacities for creative adjustment to conflicts, as Follett emphasized: "Give your difference, welcome my difference, unify all difference in the larger whole – such is the law of growth."

- Failure to integrate results in diminished individual potential, weakened group power, and tensions vulnerable to manipulation. **Eg. The Lok Adalats** use mediation and conciliation to resolve disputes, align with Follett's integration model. Instead of a winner and a loser, both parties work together to find a

mutually acceptable solution, preventing prolonged legal battles and fostering better community relations.

In historical labor movements like Gandhiji's proposal during the **Ahmedabad Textile Mill strike** in 1918, which integrated worker demands for wages with employer productivity needs through dialogue and evocation. This avoided domination during strikes and wages were fixed at a mid point.

C. Power and Authority

Follett was critical of the static, positional view of power and authority held by classical theorists.

Follett attempted a separation of power and authority. While authority is the legally assigned, legitimate power, she argued that it doesn't guarantee the ability to exercise power in every situation. The effectiveness of authority is dynamic.

Power Over vs. Power With:

- **Power Over:** The traditional, positional exercise of power in a monocratic way, leading to resentment and inefficient compliance. Follett believed this was an arbitrary use of power.
- **Power With:** The associative, collaborative exercise of power. This is where power is exercised not because of a position, but because "the situation requires it." This leads to higher compliance. Eg. In a hospital, the urgent need for patient care is what the situation demands, so the compliance of the nurse to take care of the patient is higher. The Doctor does not have to exercise power over the nurse. It is automatically a power with a situation.

Law of Situation

proposes that leadership and decision-making should be based on the specific demands of the context, rather than on hierarchical authority or personal preferences. This means that the most appropriate course of action should be determined by the unique circumstances and requirements of a given situation, rather than by the directives of a superior.

Depersonalization of Power

Exercise of Power with. Follett's solution was to depersonalize power, so subordinates feel that the command is not coming from a superior's position, but

from the needs of the job itself. Follett maintained that power and authority should not be shared or delegated; rather, they "belong to the job and stay with the job."

Manager as a "Salesman"

A manager should act as a persuasive "salesman," generating a circular response where workers feel they are accepting a command because it makes sense for the job, not because they are being ordered. This increases acceptance and efficiency.

D. Responsibility; Cumulative Responsibility and Participation

Classical theory held that a subordinate is responsible to their superior. Follett rejected this hierarchical, monocratic view. According to her,

responsibility should be "towards what" (the job) and not "towards whom" (the boss).

- **Collective Responsibility:** She advocated for collective responsibility, a joint action where all parties involved in a task are mutually responsible for its successful completion. This contrasts with the idea of shared or delegated responsibility.
- **Meaningful Responsibility:** For Follett, organizational responsibility becomes meaningful by being "functional, pluralistic, and cumulative," meaning it is tied to competence, social skills, and collective effort.

On Manager's authority

Follett's view of authority necessitates redefining responsibility as an attribute of a person's function within the organization, shifting focus from "to whom" one is responsible to "for what," underscoring that function trumps position and enabling workers to assume responsible roles in management without sharp divides between planning and execution. As distinctions between managers and the managed fade, she

pioneered worker participation, advocating involvement in deciding order execution to foster not just individual but joint responsibility, making employee representation an integral organizational element. Cumulative responsibility is pluralistic and group-oriented, viewing functions interdependently rather than in isolation, requiring coordination through cross-functioning at the lowest levels and earliest stages to weave responsibilities together, with the interweaving of experiences as the ultimate authority. Participation, in this framework, enhances

collective responsibility by recognizing identity of interests, awareness of interdependence, interpenetration of activities, and integration of perspectives, while fixing responsibility—especially for failures—serves educational purposes to improve future performance rather than allocate blame.

- In India, this is reflected in practices like Maruti Suzuki's quality circles, where workers actively participate in problem-solving, embodying cumulative responsibility and evoking innovative solutions through shared accountability and integration of viewpoints.

D. Coordination.

Follett viewed coordination as the harmonious integration of all parts of an organization. She proposed four principles of coordination:

- 1. Coordination through Direct Contact:** Achieving coordination by minimizing intermediaries and encouraging direct communication between concerned parties. Eg. Direct meetings between a Chief Secretary and various departmental heads to resolve inter-departmental issues, bypassing lengthy bureaucratic channels.
- 2. Coordination at an Early Stage:** Coordination must be an integral part of policy-making from the very beginning. Eg. The PM GatiShakti initiative, where all ministries involved in a major infrastructure project (e.g., roads, railways, defense) are brought together at the initial planning stage to prevent future conflicts and delays.
- 3. Coordination as a Continuous Process:** Coordination is not a one-time event but a continuous activity. Eg. A permanent body like the Cabinet Secretariat in India whose job is to continuously monitor and ensure coordination between different ministries, thereby serving as a central hub for ongoing coordination.
- 4. Reciprocal Relationship of all Concerned:** The idea that all parties involved in a situation should have a reciprocal responsibility to coordinate with each other. This is a mutual, non-hierarchical relationship. Eg. In a joint defense operation, the Indian Army, Navy, and Air Force coordinate with each other not out of hierarchy, but out of reciprocal need and responsibility for mission success.

IV. Dynamic Administration

Follett portrayed business organizations as social agencies that provide employment, opportunities for personal development, and platforms for building human relations, achieving functional unity through patterns of circular response, evocation, integration, control, and authority, as detailed in her posthumous work *Dynamic Administration*. Coordination emerges as the core principle of management, defined as the harmonious ordering of parts, with four key facets: coordination by direct contact among responsible heads, including cross-relations horizontally rather than solely vertically through executives; involvement in early stages where stakeholders participate in policy formulation to ease implementation; as a continuous process requiring permanent machinery, such as cabinet secretariats, to identify and resolve issues; and as a reciprocal relation interconnecting all situational factors, with national boards facilitating this. She stressed the need for continuous research-based information to support this dynamic approach. Distinguishing power from authority, Follett defined power as the ability to make things happen, an inherent management function favoring joint or co-active power—"power with" rather than "power over"—and argued that dividing or delegating power contradicts true management, instead advocating integration of activities for collectively developed power, noting that "power could be created and kindled, or smothered."

- Authority, conversely, is vested power flowing from one's function, job, and evolving situations, promoting functional or pluralistic authority due to expertise while acknowledging a central role for the chief executive as a focal point, yet rejecting hierarchical "over and under" models in favor of authority as pluralistic and cumulative, arising from below through interlocking activities, knowledge, and circular response.
- The law of situation dictates that authority stems from objective work demands rather than personal imposition, requiring sensitivity to reciprocal responses and changes, thereby depersonalizing orders to avoid bossism and resentment—orders should emerge from collective study of the situation, as composite decisions derived from action, with standardized methods inducing employees to "work with" rather than "under" management.
- While echoing classical thinkers like Taylor and Weber in concerns over order-giving, Follett humanized it by prioritizing factors like time, place, and circumstances, and emphasizing human relations in context.
- In India, companies like Infosys exemplify this through their matrix structures, where horizontal coordination and the law of situation guide project teams, building co-active power via employee stock options and participative forums that integrate diverse expertise for dynamic administration.

V. The Service Motive in Administration

Follett believed that the "science of administration" should be guided by a service motive. She likened a good administrator to a good doctor, whose primary goal is the welfare of their patient. For Follett, the ultimate

product of administration is the welfare of society, and all scientific and technical rigor should be employed to achieve this end.

VI. Collective Planning and Professionalization of Business Management

While endorsing collective planning on national or international scales, Follett opposed top-down impositions by central governments, predicting their failure and instead positioning the state as a facilitator for self-coordination through direct, voluntary contacts among industry heads, ensuring planning harmonizes with individualism via interpenetration of authority rather than super-authority.

She viewed **business as a social agency** with vital functions, advocating its professionalization based on the service motive—critiquing profit-centric views by equating business service to that of doctors or teachers, seeing true value in providing opportunities for individual development through organized human Relationships, where the production process matters as much as the product—and a scientific foundation, involving the development and application of standards to both technical and human aspects, alongside building an organized body of knowledge from research and executive experience. **Eg.** In India, organizations like the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Gujarat apply Follett's service motive incooperative planning, integrating women's economic interests through participative structures that balance collective goals with individual initiative, while post-independence Five-Year Plans initially suffered from top-down flaws but evolved toward NITI Aayog's cooperative federalism, facilitating interpenetration for broader scope.

VII. Critical Evaluation and Contributions

Follett's ideas, while innovative, faced criticism for lacking systematic formulation despite her numerous articles, with R.J.S. Baker noting she "threw out interesting ideas more or less randomly," making consistency hard to trace.

1. Her idealism drew scrutiny for proposing simultaneous achievement of opposites like collectivism and individualism or centralization and decentralization, as Brian R. Fry questioned the feasibility of such combinations. "Her Idealism is showing"

2. Additionally, G.V.I.S.H.I.A.N.I. critiqued her empirical approach for overlooking the scientific social content of organizations, and though she faulted classical theory for mechanism and one-sidedness, her own work invited similar charges.
3. Nonetheless, her contributions are profound: positioning the group as the core of social processes where individuals find fulfillment, extending this to the state as social life's pinnacle and business as a vital agency; achieving functional unity via coordination, interpenetration, evocation, and integration; basing control and authority on knowledge and the law of the situation; and promoting participative leadership for harmonious purposes.
4. She pioneered "power with" over "power over," highlighting psychological aspects and bridging Taylor's mechanism to behavioral schools, as George praised her as a "true management philosopher" who introduced partnership and group thinking, transforming literature.
5. Metcalfe and Erwick lauded her concepts as "in advance of our time" and a "goldmine" for cooperation, while Gross compared her innovativeness to Florence Nightingale's, noting broader horizons.
6. Follett was the first to theorize professionalizing business management, with Pugh, Hickson, and Heineng emphasizing her core proposition for democratic societies: arranging situations for voluntary cooperation.
7. Overall, her work reflects commitment to self-government and conflict resolution, sharing commonalities with modern feminist theories, as per Noyle Merton and S.A. Lindquist.