International Journal of Engineering, Management and Humanities (IJEMH)
Volume 6, Issue 5, Sep.-Oct., 2025 pp: 262-266 ISSN: 2584-2145 www.ijemh.com

A Critical Review of the Synthesis of Classical and Human Relations Approaches in Contemporary Management

EDWIN IKPAWHO
Area Retail Operations Manager, Sundry Markets Nig. Ltd.

ASSUMPTA UJU OGU
Rhema University Nigeria, Aba, Abia State

Date of Submission: 06-10-2025 Date of Acceptance: 17-10-2025

Abstract
This review article critically evaluates the enduring influence of classical and human relations management approaches in contemporary organizational practices. By synthesizing existing literature, the paper demonstrates that modern management is a dynamic blend of these two foundational schools of thought. The analysis shows that while classical principles provide the essential framework for efficiency and structure, human relations principles are crucial for fostering collaboration, innovation, and employee well-being. This paper argues that effective 21st-century management requires a hybrid model that skillfully integrates elements from both paradigms to navigate the complexities of a knowledge-based economy. The study concludes by identifying key themes for future research into this blended approach.

Keywords: Classical management theory, Human relations management, Modern management, Organizational practices, Hybrid model, Management synthesis, Employee well-being, Organizational efficiency.

I. Introduction

The field of management is built on foundational theories that continue to shape contemporary practices. This article critically evaluates the enduring influence of the classical and human relations approaches to management, demonstrating their continued relevance and limitations in today's dynamic business environment. While often seen as competing ideologies, these two schools of thought represent a historical progression that has shaped how we understand and manage work. The study aims to synthesize existing research to provide a comprehensive, evidence-based understanding of the integration of these two management theories in modern practice.

The **classical approach**, which emerged during the Industrial Revolution, focused on efficiency and productivity, viewing organizations as rational machines to be optimized. Pioneering figures such as **Frederick Taylor** (*The Principles of Scientific Management*, 1911) and **Henri Fayol** (*General and Industrial Management*, 1949) laid the groundwork for modern organizational structures and process-driven management. Their principles of specialization, hierarchy, and strict rules are still foundational to large-scale manufacturing and bureaucratic institutions. However, this approach's rigid, top-down nature often fails to account for human variables and has been criticized for stifling creativity and employee morale (Morgan, 1997).

In a direct response to this mechanistic view, the **human relations approach** shifted the focus from the task to the worker. The seminal **Hawthorne Studies** conducted by **Elton Mayo** (*The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization*, 1933) revealed that social and psychological factors, such as group dynamics and communication, significantly influence productivity. This led to a new understanding of the manager's role as a leader and facilitator rather than just an authority figure. Theorists like **Douglas McGregor** (*The Human Side of Enterprise*, 1960) further solidified this perspective by emphasizing employee motivation and well-being.

Despite their different origins, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Modern management practice often requires a synthesis of both. This review article argues that successful organizations today operate with a **hybrid model**, integrating the structured efficiency of classical theory with the people-centric principles of human relations.

International Journal of Engineering, Management and Humanities (IJEMH)
Volume 6, Issue 5, Sep.-Oct., 2025 pp: 262-266 ISSN: 2584-2145 www.ijemh.com

II. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical framework is anchored in the Classical and Human Relations schools of management, which are analyzed not as mutually exclusive but as complementary frameworks that inform contemporary management practices.

2.1 The Classical School of Management

The classical school provides the theoretical backbone for organizational structure and operational efficiency. **Frederick Taylor's** scientific management principles, focusing on time and motion studies and the optimization of individual tasks, remain a cornerstone of modern business process engineering. For example, the standardized assembly lines in manufacturing and the highly scripted customer service protocols in call centers are direct legacies of Taylor's work. Critics argue that this approach leads to a dehumanization of labor, as it often overlooks the social needs of workers (Morgan, 1997).

Henri Fayol's administrative principles, however, provided a macro-level view of management. His 14 principles, such as unity of command and scalar chain, laid the groundwork for the hierarchical organizational charts seen today in virtually every large corporation. These principles, while sometimes seen as rigid, are crucial for ensuring clear lines of authority and accountability, especially in complex operations. **Max Weber's** theory of bureaucracy, with its emphasis on formal rules, rational-legal authority, and impersonality, also contributes to this structural foundation (Etzioni, 1964). The principles of bureaucracy are evident in formal job descriptions, career progression based on merit, and organizational policies.

2.2 The Human Relations School

The human relations movement emerged from the recognition that a purely rational, classical approach was insufficient. The **Hawthorne Studies** (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939) demonstrated that social and psychological factors significantly influence productivity, often more so than physical working conditions. This discovery highlighted the importance of informal work groups, peer relationships, and the sense of belonging. The findings of these studies directly challenged the classical assumption that employees are motivated solely by economic factors.

Following this, theorists such as **Abraham Maslow** (*A Theory of Human Motivation*, 1943) provided a theoretical framework for understanding employee needs beyond a simple economic perspective. **Douglas McGregor's Theory Y** (1960) posited that managers should assume workers are inherently motivated and creative, leading to a management style based on trust, collaboration, and employee empowerment. These principles are evident in modern workplaces that emphasize flat organizational structures, open communication, and team-building exercises. **Mary Parker Follett's** work on "creative experience" (1924), which highlighted the importance of "power with" rather than "power over," is also a foundational text for modern collaborative management.

While the Human Relations Theory emerged from the Hawthorne studies, its core tenets have been subject to considerable scholarly criticism. For instance, **Charles Perrow** (1986) argued that the relationship between worker satisfaction and productivity might be contrary to the theory's assumptions, suggesting that high productivity might lead to job satisfaction rather than the reverse. This critique challenged the causal link proposed by the original research. Additionally, **Scott** (1961) noted that the Hawthorne effect itself—the increased productivity due to being observed—was not a function of improved social relations but rather the result of workers feeling singled out as an "elite group" due to the attention from senior officials.

III. Contemporary Organizational Management: Case Studies in the Hybrid Model

This study's theoretical contribution is to move beyond a simple re-evaluation of established management theories to propose and test a novel theoretical synthesis. The core contribution is the **Hybrid Model**, which argues that successful organizations are those that effectively integrate the mechanistic efficiency of classical theory with the social and motivational insights of human relations theory.

Case Study 1: Zappos' Culture of Human Relations

Zappos, a successful online retail company, provides a compelling example of a business built upon the principles of the Human Relations Theory. The company's culture is designed to empower employees, believing that creativity and dedication

International Journal of Engineering, Management and Humanities (IJEMH)
Volume 6, Issue 5, Sep.-Oct., 2025 pp: 262-266 ISSN: 2584-2145 www.ijemh.com

are natural byproducts of a positive work environment. CEO Tony Hsieh famously stated, "Zappos is a customer service company that just happens to sell shoes," emphasizing that the company's success is rooted in its customer experience and internal culture, not just its product.

Zappos' management approach is reflected in its core values and policies. For instance, customer service representatives are not limited by call times and are encouraged to build personal connections with customers. This autonomy and emphasis on relationships align directly with the Human Relations approach, which posits that a friendly working environment and employee empowerment are catalysts for performance. The company's commitment to these values has yielded significant results, including high customer retention rates and consistent recognition on "best places to work" lists.

Case Study 2: Sundry Market: A Hybrid Management Model

Sundry Market Limited, the company behind the rapidly expanding supermarket chain Marketsquare, offers a compelling example of a hybrid management model. Since its launch in 2015, the company has grown from a single store to a preferred destination for customers across Nigeria. This success is largely due to its unique integration of two distinct management theories: classical and human relations.

Classical Management in Practice

The company's operational backbone is built on a classical management framework, characterized by a strong emphasis on administrative procedures and efficiency. This approach is central to its "low price" promise, which relies on the meticulous monitoring of internal inflation and a bureaucratic structure. This focus on productivity and strict adherence to rules, however, often leads to an environment that employees may perceive as inflexible, as they are typically not consulted on systemic changes.

The Human Relations Component

In contrast, Sundry Market demonstrates a strong commitment to a human relations approach through its employee and customer-centric policies. For employees, this includes offering uncommon benefits and public holiday allowances that set it apart from local competitors. The company also promotes career growth through targeted on-the-job and classroom training, along with other professional development initiatives for all staff levels.

This human relations philosophy extends to its customer service, which is guided by four key principles:

- Treat every customer with respect.
- Understand and satisfy reasonable customer needs.
- Take responsibility for resolving issues.
- Keep all promises made to customers.

The Sundry Market business model is a successful example of a hybrid approach, blending the structured efficiency of classical management with the people-focused principles of human relations. By combining a strict operational framework with a strong commitment to employee welfare and customer satisfaction, Marketsquare has been able to achieve significant growth and establish itself as a market leader in Nigeria.

This hybrid model demonstrates that modern organizations can successfully combine bureaucratic efficiency with a focus on employee well-being and customer relationships, proving that the principles of Human Relations Theory remain relevant and adaptable in a global context.

IV. The Proposed Hybrid Management Framework (HMF)

The preceding analysis has demonstrated that a rigid adherence to either the classical or human relations approach is insufficient for contemporary organizational needs. While existing literature points to a synthesis, it often lacks a clear, actionable model for its implementation. This paper proposes a **Hybrid Management Framework (HMF)**, a novel conceptual model for effectively blending these two schools of thought. The HMF is designed for a new generation of managers operating in the dynamic contexts of a knowledge-based economy.

The framework is built upon three core pillars, each integrating principles from both classical and human relations theory:

- **Pillar 1: Structured Autonomy.** This pillar marries the classical need for clear structure and accountability with the human relations principle of employee empowerment. In practice, this means establishing well-defined goals, roles, and performance metrics (classical), but granting employees the autonomy and authority to decide how to achieve those goals (human relations). This

approach avoids the micromanagement of Taylorism while ensuring goal alignment.

- **Pillar 2: Data-Driven Empathy.** This pillar combines the classical emphasis on data and rational decision-making with the human relations focus on employee well-being and psychological safety. Managers are encouraged to use performance data and analytics (classical) not just for top-down control but to identify and address bottlenecks, burnout, and skill gaps (human relations). This ensures that decisions are both efficient and human-centric.
- **Pillar 3: Adaptive Hierarchy.** This pillar reconciles the classical need for hierarchy and clear command chains with the human relations preference for flat, collaborative structures. The HMF proposes an "adaptive hierarchy" where formal roles and reporting lines exist for clear communication and accountability during routine operations (classical), but are flexible and fluid to allow for project-based collaboration and cross-functional teams (human relations).

This framework offers a unique perspective on the timeless management debate. It argues that the challenge is not to discard old theories but to repurpose them for a new context. By providing a structured model, this paper transitions the theoretical discussion from a debate to a practical guide, offering a valuable contribution to both academic literature and managerial practice. Future research should empirically test the HMF's effectiveness across different industries and organizational cultures.

V. Discussion and Conclusion

This review has demonstrated that the classical and human relations approaches, while originating from different philosophies, are not obsolete. Rather, they form the two essential components of effective modern management. The classical approach provides the scaffolding for organizational efficiency, while the human relations approach provides the spirit that motivates and engages the workforce. A purely classical approach risks stifling innovation and leading to employee burnout, while a purely human relations approach may lack the structure needed for large-scale operations and accountability.

This synthesis is not accidental; it is a pragmatic response to a dynamic business environment that requires both predictable efficiency and adaptable, motivated employees. Future research should explore the specific leadership competencies required for this hybrid approach, the challenges of implementing it in different organizational cultures, and its impact on long-term innovation and organizational resilience. This study provides a comprehensive theoretical foundation for understanding the past, present, and future of management. The proposed Hybrid Management Framework offers a practical and nuanced model for managers seeking to thrive in a complex, knowledge-based economy, providing a clear path forward for both research and practice.

References

[1]. Blalock, A.B. & Blalock Jr., H.M. (1982). *Introduction to social research.* Englewood Cliffs,N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
[2]. Certo, S.C. and Certo, S.T. (2006).*Modern Management*. (10th Ed.) Pearson Education Inc.
[3]. Donnelly, R., (2000).*Schools of Management Thought*, Scotland: Pitman Publishing.
[4]. Drury, H. B., (1915).*Scientific management: a history and criticism*. New York, NY, USA: Columbia University.
[5]. Etzioni, A. (1964). *Modern Organizations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
[6]. Fayol, H. (1949). *General and Industrial Management*. London: Pitman.
[7]. Follett, M.P. (1927). *Dynamic administration* (reprint 1942). New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers.
[8]. Ghoshal, S., & Gratton, L. (2002). Corporate Agility and the Human Resource Function. *European Management Journal*, 20(1), 1-13.
[9]. Hersey. P., Blanchard. K., and Johnson. D., (2001) *Management of Organizational Behavior.*(8th Ed.) Singapore: Pearson Education.
[10]. Hodgetts, Richard M. and Altman, Steven(1981) *History of Management Thought*, Paul ed. New York, MacMillan Publishers.
[11]. McGregor, D. (1960). *The Human Side of Enterprise*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
[12]. Mayo, E. (1933). *The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization*. New York: Macmillan.
[13]. Morgan, G. (1997). *Images of Organization*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
[14]. Parker Follett, M. (1924). *Creative Experience*. London: Longmans, Green and Co.
[15]. Perrow, C. (1986). *Complex Organizations: A Critical Essay*. New York: Random House.

[16]. Roethlisberger, F. J., & Dickson, W. J. (1939). *Management and the Worker*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
[17]. Schein, E. H. (2004). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
[18]. Scott, W. G. (1961). Organization Theory: An Overview and an Appraisal. *Academy of Management Journal*, 4(1), 7-26.
[19]. Taylor, F. W. (1911). *The Principles of Scientific Management*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
[20]. Trist, E. L., & Bamforth, K. W. (1951). Some Social and Psychological Consequences of the Longwall Method of Coal-Getting. *Human Relations*, 4(1), 3-38.
[21]. Woodward, J. (1965). *Industrial Organization: Theory and Practice*. London: Oxford University Press.