RENSIS LIKERT
(5 August 1903–3 September 1981)

Rensis Likert is known for his contribution to the Human Relations Movement in public administration but he transcends the narrow disciplinary boundaries to provide workable solutions to organizational problems. Specifically he is known for his contribution to the organization theory. His close association with the Human Relation Movement and subsequent analysis of the role of democratic participation and improved performance has been a landmark in the writings on organizations. When Elton Mayo, Chris Argyris and Fritz Roethlisberger were working hard to humanize the much disparaged Scientific Management, Likert was focusing on the imperatives of an organization structure for evolving new techniques of participatory management and democratic leadership. His contribution to a nuts and bolts kind of description of administrative and management issues which increasingly perceived organizational structures as engineering concerns, brought much admired acceptability to the human relations movement. In his sustained efforts to innovate studies in administrative sciences his partner and wife Jane Gibson, whom he married during his tenure in the University of Columbia, had been a strong collaborator and contributor, with much of the later work coming jointly in partnership.

Public administration literature describes Rensis Likert as a ‘Creator of Organizations’ (Kish 1982). So passionate was his contribution to organizational theory that his holistic understanding of administrative and management problems in many ways surpass many contemporary public administration scholars of today. Scientific Management is known to have missed out many concerns of human psychology and advanced through abstractions in work environment. It created an undisputed scientific formula to achieve efficiency and productivity. The issues of labour and management were reduced to scientific principles. Many important factors and indicators which could have brought public administration to a more peoples’ oriented discipline which it actually was, were ignored or rejected on grounds of their intangible subjectivity and fuzziness. Likert’s knowledge and training in psychology and sociology along with engineering could find ways to measure even this subjectivity and fuzziness and adopt them as important inputs to the understanding of organizations. His contribution stands apart as a balanced
approach to the study of organizations which could look into the overlapping domains of human behavior and mechanical-scientific principles. His leanings have been in favour of human behavior as a creator of organizations which helped him to reinvent participatory management and democratize organizations in the period following the great depression and during the Second World War.

**Training and specialization of Rensis Likert:**

Likert has an interestingly interdisciplinary training in engineering sciences and social sciences, which demonstrates an evolved understanding about managing an organization. He was born in Wyoming USA in 1903. He completed his civil engineering degree from the University of Michigan in 1922 and was gradually moving towards becoming an engineer. By the time he completed his engineering studies he realized that there were many more unanswered questions than what science could answer. He became more inclined towards social and organizational issues of governance rather than engineering issues. His desire to work for people was unsatiated with the engineering degree and in consideration of his interests, he studied sociology and graduated as a sociologist in 1926. His continuous search for what he perceived could provide answer to social problems could also not be addressed through sociology, so he moved to the Union Theological Seminary and from there to the Department of Psychology at the Columbia University. He was pulled into the debates on new social psychology, attitudes towards race and the international politics of the times. Many of his views converged in his publication titled, ‘A Technique for the Measurement of Attitudes’ in 1932. The same year he received his PhD from the same university.

An urge to be an institutional builder was deep seated within Likert and this is reflected in his initiation of the Institute of Social Research (ISR) in the University of Michigan. This has since then become a hub for training social scientists in research methodology and techniques of social surveys. His research had been more than just a ritual of a degree for through his thesis, he is known to have given the famous “Likert Scale”. This has since then become a metaphor used by behaviouralists for a normatively accepted behaviour called ‘sufficing’. Likert’s contribution to social analysis and to the development of social statistics has been a tremendously effective analytical tool in the US public policy arenas. He did many programme surveys and also served
as a Director of the US Department of Agriculture in 1939. He entered programme analysis activities and remained closely associated with the American Statistical Association immediately after the war and at the beginning of the turbulent 1950s. He became its President in 1959 and contributed rigorously to social and organizational research in many ways. After 24 years in 1970, Likert retired from the University of Michigan as emeritus director of ISR and professor of psychology and sociology.

In many of his innovative survey techniques he studied farmer’s responses through the sharing of their experiences and reactions to various types of agricultural programmes implemented by the US Department of Agriculture and the Division of Programme Surveys. His meaningful contribution to the department impressed the US Government and he was invited to design an independent statistical unit monitoring the activities of programme agencies. Very few could link the early successes of the US Government in public administration and governance studies to this modest initiative of ‘Survey Techniques’ developed by Rensis Likert as it created an accountability framework for implementing agencies and subsequently helped the departments to formulate implementable policies. The policy slippages in implementation tasks of government were reduced and cost-effective policy effort could be brought centre stage. Many evaluation studies of governments across the globe are still leaning back on the statistical measurement scales initiated by Likert.

**Likert’s three Main Contributions to Public Administration:**

1. **Contribution to statistical evaluation tools of social surveys and the Likert Scale:**

   Likert found that measuring social behavior and attitudes was the most complex task of social surveys. In his monograph, ‘*A Technique for the Measurement of Attitudes*’ (1932-33) he found that the difficulty lay in the ‘statistical difficulties which are encountered when everyday aspects of social behavior, ordinarily handled as qualitative affairs, are treated from a mathematical point of view’. He made thorough investigations into the works of Gardner Murphy, who was also his supervisor in PhD, and other contemporary scholars such as Bain (1930), Vetter (1930), Katz and Allport (1931) and Watson (1932) to find that the understanding on personality traits and social attitudes was quite complete and well examined. He, however, found a special interest in the statistical procedures
developed by Thurstone (1929) in which he could show a special correlation between scores and case histories. He made questionnaire based surveys on three issues ie; ‘internationalism’, ‘imperialism’ and ‘the Negro’. He found different findings on generalized and specific attitudes. These differences were notable due to their cultural variations which in turn required different scales for measurement of attitudes in different cultural setups. Through such a study, Likert gave way to more knowledgeable survey techniques which the comparative administrative movement of the 1960s could have used and it also contained the potential to become a logical challenge to the New Public Management critique to strengthen the arguments of modern public administration scholars like David Rosenbloom (1993) and Lawrence Lynn Jr. (1994).

Besides the cultural specificity of survey techniques, Likert also established that an individual opinion may differ from the opinion supported by a group. ‘Sufficing’ as one of the metaphor generated by Herbert Simon was used by Likert to justify a situation of compromise between efficiency and satisfaction in human beings.

Likert’s main contribution has been the manner in which his five point scale measured the opinion between the range of “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” (Bertram, 2007). The distribution of opinion in his method was done in a much simpler manner than what was done by Thurstone’s psychophysical method of equal appearing intervals. Thurstone’s method also depended upon the panel of judges to sort out the significance of statements. Likert’s method could dispense with the judges, make the method work on a simpler normal curve and yet produce the same results as that of Thurstone. Likert developed the Likert scale in 1932, and used it to identify the extent of a person’s beliefs, attitudes, or feelings towards some objects. This was a psychometric response scale used in questionnaires and was used to measure a single trait only. Likert scale has been a popular subject in social surveys and has been repeatedly published in the series ‘Classic Contributions to Social Psychology’. It has also been reproduced in the Likert

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1 “There is no reason to expect that the logical analysis of the person who selects the statements will necessarily be supported by the group” (1932: p.49)

2 In human relations approach, the scientific management principle of efficiency and effectiveness is combined with the element of satisfaction in human behavior to invent a state of ‘satisficing’.
and Murphy’s *Public Opinion and the Individual* (1938). The Scale has however not addressed many problems of cross-cultural nature and has been accused of being culturally biased especially in some health surveys involving Central American and Vietnamese refugee population. (Flaskerud, 1988:185-186).

Likert made some path breaking social surveys of government programmes and strategic decisions to highlight their impact upon populations. The agricultural surveys made by him catapulted Likert’s office to a full fledged general sample survey organization. The advancing study of the behavior and attitudes developed some reliable tools of ‘multistage probability area sampling methods’, ‘fixed question with open ended answers’ and many evaluation techniques which could study decisions related to war and peace especially the prediction techniques for the buying of war bonds between 1941-1945. He received the Medal of Freedom in 1946 for his leadership to a research team which studied the effect of constant bombing of cities on the morale of the civilian populations of Germany and Japan. Following this Likert left Washington to formally establish the Survey Research Centre at the University of Michigan. It was initially a struggle with space and staff till it got a university basement and some PhD students to help it grow. Some important faculty members such as Robert Angell and Theodore Newcomb the Centre grew very fast and spread its work into wider interdisciplinary and innovative new social science areas.

Many new methods which found way through this Centre included:

I. scientific probability methods of sampling from the country level on down to the household and personal levels,

II. sound methods of controls for responses and nonresponses,

III. improved questionnaire and coding methods,

IV. machine computations, and deeper methods of analysis and presentation of results.

2. Leadership studies
Likert’s contribution to leadership studies has a special significance. During the Second World War period the prevalent leadership research considered a study of leadership related ‘Traits’ as a means to understand world leaders. This could not provide satisfying results which could move ahead as a general theory of leadership. Around the same time the Ohio State University conducted research on leadership and identified two distinct styles of leadership i.e; “Initiating structure” or ‘getting job done’ and “consideration structure” or a ‘relationship generation with the employees’. The Ohio team led by Ralph E. Stogdill and later Dr. Carroll L. Sharple at the Bureau of Business Research at the Ohio University developed a scale which included a long list of 150 statements with more added at a later phase to measure nine different dimensions of leadership behavior. This was called the Leaders Behaviour Description Questionnaire (LBDQ).

In contrast to Ohio research on leadership, Likert led the Michigan University’s research team on leadership studies. He identified two distinct styles of leadership which they referred to as "job-centered" and "employee-centered." A job-centered leader is similar to the ‘initiating structure’ of Ohio School studies which believes that employees are just a means to an end. As part of the Human Relations Movement, Likert concluded by suggesting like Elton Mayo that a close supervision of employees yields better results. The other form of leadership is the ‘employee-centered’ leadership similar to the ‘consideration’ leadership which enhances relationships, interaction and mutual understanding between the worker and the employer. It was found that both structures were important as ‘job centred’ leaders were admired by their supervisors as much as the ‘employee centred’ were liked by the workers. Likert’s study is much admired till today as it suggested an employee orientation coupled with general supervision improved productivity.

Likert could look into various forms of leadership during his surveys of government programmes in specific communities. Leadership pushed and helped the implementation of many programmes but it continued to be treated marginally in administrative sciences. In his book *The Human Organization: Its Management and Value* (1967, New York: Mc Graw Hill) Likert has studied four types of leadership. (a) Exploitative and authoritative: The leader imposes top down decisions upon subordinates and a fear of authority is considered to be the motivating force to obtain work. This traditional characteristic of bureaucracy created a gulf of inactivity between the administrator and the subordinate. (b) Benevolent authoritative: This is much like the previous
one where the decisions are top down management oriented except that the fear of authority is created not through punitive measures but through rewards. This organizational environment makes team work almost impossible. (c) Consultative: in this type of leadership, the management consults subordinates and adopts a few of their ideas but this does not generate a sense of belongingness due to which subordinates do not feel responsible to achieve the organization’s goals. (d) Participative: Is a superior form of leadership because the leader works with subordinates as a team which is sufficiently motivated to achieve organizational goals. This book has much to offer to leadership research especially on participative management in organizations. Effrat,A comments, (1968)Science, Dec.1968,Volume 162, no.3859, pp. 1260-1261)”It should have something of interest to say to Charles de Gaulle, Andrew Cordier, Pope Paul, “Danny the Red” and anyone else concerned about how to design an organization or society which is efficient and well coordinated as well as democratic and solidary.”Leadership was found to be able to generate competence, motivation and loyalty to the organization. Leadership studies reflected a mix of the classical sociological tradition coming from Max Weber’s study of Bureaucracy and Robert Michels investigations into sociology of political parties and the future of democracies but it further looked into Taylor’s Scientific Management and the Human Relations Movement. His study of group dynamics and the need for growing further into an enhancement of workers’ productivity and sense of belongingness to the organization highlighted the need to study the systemic nature of the enterprise so that its formal and informal aspects could both be brought together for democratizing organizations. However, it is not clear how an organization which is treated as an aggregate of small groups provide all information to the manager willingly and this can still prevent the managerial monopoly of facts and information which need to be shared with the workers. Thus while his work is an important contribution to organizational theory, it may not have answers to many questions which emerge in diagnosing the operations of managerial leadership.

3. Organizational management:
At a later stage in his life Likert became more concerned about the problems of organizational management. His concerned deepened as he expressed his ideas into three books, namely, New
Patterns of Management (1961), The Human Organization: Its Management and Value (1967), and the third book was written in collaboration with his wife, New Ways of Managing Conflict (1976). He also suggested the need for the ideas on organizational management to move into consulting practice and for doing it he started another organization called, Rensis Likert Associates. This suggests that his desire to make organizations workable and also acceptable requires an intensively participative management system that goes beyond the Weber’s steel frame structure.

To find a way out of Weber’s pyramidal system, Likert analyzed four basic characteristics of organizations as it grows towards a participative organizational management systems. He referred to Weber’s organization as ‘System1’ which was designed upon an exploitative-authoritative organizational system of bureaucratic structures. From here the organizational research navigated through psychological analysis techniques used by Likert to ‘System2’ and ‘System3’ of benevolent authoritative system to consultative systems of organizations to finally evolve into ‘System4’ of participatory management of organizations. ‘System4’ is a futuristic expression used by Likert sometimes also referred to as a ‘Code’ which is the mature form of organization achieved through modern interdisciplinary social survey research based upon participant observation techniques. Its four fundamental imperatives are explained in Fig.1.
‘Interdisciplinary-ness’ helped public administration to move beyond a hierarchical structures of Weberian bureaucratic theories and the ‘nuts and bolts’ of management strategies. The on surveys and studies in business, industrial, and governmental settings led the discipline to break through the traditional structures of administrative sciences and to re-create it around human elements and the natural deficits of human nature which could also not be ignored. In this radical departure from the pre-existing Weber oriented public administration literature, Likert’s proximity to Robert Kahn, Daniel Katz who were also involved in an early research on participative management at the Institute of Social Research helped develop an alternative to ‘System4’ of Likert(Miner, 2006:152). The result was a ‘more sophisticated statements of the Michigan way of thinking’(Miner,2006:153). Katz and Kahn have deeply expressed their indebtedness towards Likert for the behavioural humanist value orientation in their work ‘The Social Psychology of Organizations’(1966 & 1978). Likert’s survey techniques further blossomed in the works of Floyd Mann and Stanley Seashore’s action research for organizational development. Mann and Seashore found that research data once collected from an organization or culture can be developed to understand the needs, issues and problems which in turn generate
the need for change, innovation and partnerships. These techniques which differ from other strategies of social and organizational research involve the collaboration of researchers and their objects in every stage of researching, interacting, focusing and also implementing. This particularly helped organizational management literature to re-generate workable solutions to various types of organizational pathologies.

Likert’s main focus was on managing the human component in organizations as it involves sensitivity towards their behavioural and attitudinal demands. He could demonstrate that improved empirical investigations into human nature within an organization can improve productivity as well as workers loyalty to the organization. His analysis of the evolution of System 1 to the System 4 organizations is a movement towards greater freedom, democracy and participatory decision making.

Conclusion:

Likert was primarily a solution finder and not a theory builder. He was a keen and insightful analyst of social and business situations which he addressed in his works and strived to pull organizations out of authoritarianism and unnatural control of human emotions. He worked towards creating self-confidence, loyalty, and inventiveness in workers and managers so that rational problem solving could be achieved in a more collaborative and friendly manner. He is known to be a theorist who didn’t intend to give one but which naturally and logically emerged out of his phenomenally insightful understanding of human behavior, group dynamics and relationships. Curiosity about how things worked and how to fix them when they did not coupled with an innate talent for structures and measurements revealed themselves in his quantitative and pragmatic approaches to social problems and social measurements. Increased satisfaction is related to the improved decision making and self-control that occurs due to participation that is genuinely solicited and heard.

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3 For more details see Donald P. Warwick’s ‘A theory of Public Bureaucracy, Politics, Personality and the Public Organization in a State Department, 1975, USA: Harvard University Press

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