

GATEKEEPING AND POWER

Ethical Implications of Knowledge Control in Organizations

ABSTRACT

This research examines the ethical implications of gatekeeping within hierarchical organizational structures, focusing on the intrinsic relationship between power and knowledge. Gatekeeping concentrates power by controlling access to information, leading to significant ethical concerns including unfair decision-making, lack of transparency, and inhibited accountability. Considering gatekeeping through the lens of power and knowledge dynamics, this paper highlights how those in control not only dictate what is known but also reinforce their authority through the selective dissemination of information. These dynamics limit transparency and create an environment where unethical practices flourish. To address these issues, this paper proposes an organizational model that emphasizes cross-functional collaboration, multidirectional knowledge flow, clearly defined roles, coordinated middle management, and focused expertise, which are essential for promoting ethical practices and a more equitable distribution of influence.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Gatekeeping in organizations refers to the control over knowledge, access, and decision-making, which is typically concentrated in middle or upper management. While gatekeeping is often framed as a functional necessity, it is fundamentally ethically problematic as it inherently restricts autonomy, reinforces inequality, and conceals misconduct.¹ The ethical distinction lies in the intent, impact, and fairness with which information, resources, or authority are distributed. When gatekeeping is driven by bias, disproportionately harms certain groups, or denies equitable access to critical knowledge, it shifts from a managerial tool to a source of ethical concern.

This paper begins by defining the ethical risks of problematic gatekeeping within organizational structures, followed by a theoretical framework rooted in Michel Foucault's concepts of power and knowledge. It then applies this framework to a comparative analysis of four organizational models—traditional hierarchies, developmental/fluid structures, Nonaka's middle-up-down model, and a proposed "table model"—to evaluate how each structure either reinforces or resists harmful gatekeeping practices.

Gatekeeping within organizations is morally problematic because it restricts the flow of knowledge, reinforces informational silos, enables abuses of power, and limits access to critical insights, ultimately stifling innovation, undermining collaboration, and facilitating unethical decision-making. Through a Foucauldian lens, this paper argues that gatekeeping is not only a managerial failure, but a structural and epistemological problem rooted in the way organizations control discourse and authority. To avoid gatekeeping, we should adopt a structure with these features: cross-functional collaboration, multidirectional knowledge flow, clear role division, middle management coordination, and focused expertise.

II. GATEKEEPING IN ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

Gatekeeping, the deliberate restriction of access to knowledge or decision-makers, emerges, almost inevitably, wherever an organization places informational bottlenecks in the hands of a few. In highly centralized, formal hierarchies, ideas from lower levels must thread

¹ V. Rosenblatt, "Hierarchies, Power Inequalities, and Organizational Corruption," *Journal of Business Ethics* 111 (2012): 240.



their way through a tight chain of approvals before they can shape policy, and informal networks of social capital decide who may bypass that chain and who must endure it.² This structural arrangement disconnects expertise from authority. Those who possess the greatest practical knowledge rarely possess the power to act on it, while those who possess formal power can, by controlling the flow of information, protect themselves from scrutiny.³ Information thus becomes a kind of competitive currency—it is hoarded, traded, or withheld to maintain advantage rather than shared to advance collective goals.

When knowledge becomes an exclusive privilege, corruption often follows. Information bottlenecks allow those in control to exploit their positions for personal gain through favoritism or rewards, normalizing unethical practices.⁴ Subordinates learn that compliance with such unwritten terms, rather than merit, dictates advancement and resource allocation. This subverts foundational ethical principles: autonomy is diminished as withheld information prevents meaningful deliberation; justice is denied when favoritism trumps merit; fidelity is breached by self-serving information distortion; and veracity is eroded when gatekeepers obscure truth to protect power, undermining transparency. These ethical and epistemic harms are structural, particularly in centralized, formalized organizations where learning is weak and insights are filtered. For instance, in Tayloristic hierarchies (top-down structures), the disconnect between expertise and authority invites managerial rent-seeking, as knowledgeable employees lack decision rights, tempting managers to hoard information. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle where gatekeeping and corruption become normalized and unquestioned.

Gatekeeping also cripples a company's capacity to learn. Organizational theorist Ikujiro Nonaka found that firms create new knowledge when ideas move in a constant loop: workers share their hands-on practical experience, managers turn it into clear concepts, teams combine those concepts with other ideas, and everyone tests the results in practice.⁵ This cycle works only when information flows freely across jobs and levels in a shared "knowledge space." Gatekeeping blocks that flow. When only a small circle is allowed into the con-

2 Mehdi Mahmoudsalehi, Roya Moradkhannejad, and Khalil Safari, "How Knowledge Management is Affected by Organizational Structure," *The Learning Organization* 19, no. 6 (2012): 520.

3 Giovanni Dosi, Luigi Marengo, and Maria Enrica Virgillito, "Hierarchies, Knowledge, and Power Inside Organizations," *Strategy Science* 6, no. 4 (2021): 375.

4 Rosenblatt, "Hierarchies, Power Inequalities," 239.

5 Ikujiro Nonaka, "A Dynamic Theory of Organizational Knowledge Creation," *Organization Science* 5, no. 1 (1994): 20.

versation, frontline insights stay hidden, teams stop connecting ideas, and the company continues to recycle old thinking. Nonaka also shows that some overlap in what different groups know is healthy because it lets colleagues verify information and generate new perspectives. Gatekeepers shut down that overlap, leaving fewer eyes to catch errors or expose self-serving stories. Therefore, gatekeeping not only feeds corruption; it also freezes learning, making the organization both less ethical and less innovative.

While corporate hierarchies provide a clear example of gatekeeping, these ethical dilemmas are equally prevalent in non-corporate institutions such as healthcare and education. In a clinical setting, for instance, a lead physician might act as a gatekeeper by controlling which diagnostic data is shared with the rest of a care team, potentially compromising patient autonomy. Similarly, in education, the filtering of curricula by administrative bodies serves to normalize specific ideologies while excluding others. In both cases, the immorality of gatekeeping remains the same: it is a structural exercise of power that prioritizes hierarchy over the equitable distribution of knowledge.

III. FOUCAULDIAN PERSPECTIVE

A. POWER AND KNOWLEDGE

Gatekeeping's erosion of transparency, suppression of innovation, and perpetuation of systemic bias point to deeper ethical dysfunctions that Michel Foucault's frameworks of power and knowledge, regimes of truth, and normalization are equipped to illuminate. Foucault argues that "the exercise of power creates knowledge and knowledge induces effects of power."⁶ In organizational settings, gatekeepers decide what counts as relevant information or legitimate expertise. By doing so, they produce particular knowledge that reinforces their own authority. Conversely, this knowledge legitimizes further exclusions through Foucauldian normalization, where those outside the gate are socially constructed as "uninformed" or "unqualified." Management scholars Alan McKinlay and Ken Starkey emphasize that, under Foucault's lens, managerial roles are not mere intermediaries of information but active agents in crafting the "truths" that guide people's actions and expectations.⁷ Therefore, gatekeeping is unethical because it is a recursive loop: power shapes knowledge, and that knowledge

6 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (Pantheon Books, 1980), 52.

7 Alan McKinlay and Ken Starkey, eds., *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory: From Panopticon to Technologies of Self* (SAGE Publications, 1998), 30.



justifies more power, while suppressing dissenting or marginalized perspectives.

The practical impact of Foucault's insights is clear when we examine everyday approval chains. For instance, if every budget report must pass through three managerial layers before reaching the executive dashboard, only the figures that survive each filter, which are typically those that support existing strategies, ever emerge. That filtered dataset then becomes the "knowledge" on which all future decisions rest, even though it excludes inconvenient or dissenting data. In this way, gatekeepers not only define what counts as relevant information but also protect their own authority: managers further up the chain can cite the filtered reports as justification for policies, reinforcing their power to determine which insights enter the organizational conversation.

When gatekeepers control who may produce or access organizational knowledge, they institutionalize an unequal distribution of informational resources. This concentrates decision-making in the hands of a select group and sidelines others. Ethically, this practice violates justice, because it privileges certain voices, ones aligned with dominant agendas, and systematically marginalizes others, denying all stakeholders a fair chance to contribute their expertise.

B. REGIMES OF TRUTH

Foucault describes a "regime of truth" as the set of practices and structures through which a society or institution separates true statements from false ones, granting certain discourses the status of "truth" and labeling others as "error" or "noise."⁸ Within organizations, gatekeepers establish and enforce these regimes by determining whose data, expertise, or narratives are circulated. Foucault shows that regimes of truth typically operate invisibly, solidifying particular viewpoints and rendering alternative viewpoints invisible. McKinlay and Starkey highlight how such regimes support performance evaluations, strategic plans, and "best practices," all of which become assumed standards. Thus, gatekeeping becomes unethical when it masks these choices as neutral or universal, blocking critical debate and disempowering individuals who do not conform to the prescribed "truth."

When Foucault describes a "regime of truth," he refers to the everyday practices that decide which narratives count as reality. Consider a quarterly strategy meeting where only department heads approved by senior management show key performance data. The dashboards they present are built from metrics those same gatekeep-

ers have selected and validated. Any data or story that doesn't make it onto the slide deck is essentially erased from organizational memory. This invisible filtering solidifies a single "truth": what appears in that forum becomes the accepted reality, while alternative accounts from frontline employees or external stakeholders are dismissed as "noise."

By defining and enforcing a singular "truth" or set of acceptable discourses, gatekeepers effectively dictate what counts as fact and what is dismissed as error. This secret manipulation of truth standards compromises the organization's commitment to honesty and transparency, violating the principle of veracity. When information is tailored to fit predetermined narratives rather than reflect the full complexity of reality, stakeholders cannot rely on the organization's communications as truthful, thereby eroding trust and the moral obligation to speak and act truthfully.

C. NORMALIZATION

In a "society of normalization," Foucault explains, power does not rely primarily on overt punishment but on producing standards against which individuals constantly measure themselves and others.⁹ Gatekeepers in organizations articulate the criteria for "acceptable" performance, behavior, or knowledge. Those criteria then become internalized, as employees monitor their own conformity and alter their actions to fit what has been normalized. McKinlay and Starkey argue that such normalization is perhaps the most subtle form of managerial control, because it makes power appear as self-regulation.¹⁰ When gatekeeping enforces rigid norms, it denies individuals the autonomy to innovate, to challenge discriminatory standards, or to voice alternative viewpoints.

Normalization is most harmful when rigid standards become self-enforcing. Consider two teams: Team A must adhere to a one-page template for project proposals, approved only after a formal vote by a central committee; Team B uses a flexible peer-review process where colleagues suggest improvements but do not reject proposals outright. In Team A, members quickly learn to tailor ideas to the committee's narrow expectations and innovation declines as people pre-filter their own suggestions in order to avoid rejection. In Team B, the open feedback loop encourages experimentation, as unconventional ideas are debated and refined, rather than suppressed. Gatekeeping occurs in Team A with leaders producing a norm that controls who gets to advance a project proposal, what information is included, and how it's framed. Individuals adopt this as their own measure of correctness,

⁸ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 131.

⁹ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 117.

¹⁰ McKinlay and Starkey, *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory*, 113.



coercing conformity and punishing deviation without ever naming it as “punishment.”

Gatekeeping often entails imposing fixed rules about who can join in or how work gets judged, compelling individuals to conform to norms that may not align with their perspectives or capabilities. This exertion of disciplinary power violates autonomy by limiting individuals’ freedom to define their own goals, methods, and contributions. When members internalize externally imposed standards, they lose the capacity for genuine self-determination, effectively silencing innovation and dissent. In so doing, gatekeeping breaches the ethical requirement to respect each person’s right to self-governance.

D. ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

Foucault’s mechanisms form a self-reinforcing cycle that entrenches unethical gatekeeping. First, gatekeepers shape what counts as legitimate information, which then becomes the foundation of the organization’s “truths.” Those truths are validated through rituals and metrics and are translated into expectations and standards that individuals internalize. In turn, those normalized standards justify further exclusions in what is considered valid knowledge, expanding the reach of power. This loop, power producing knowledge that is naturalized into truth and then normalized into everyday practice, ensures that any challenge to the status quo is prevented at every level, making gatekeeping a deeply structural ethical violation.

In Foucault’s view, gatekeeping is unethical because it establishes concentrated power dynamics by controlling who can produce and disseminate knowledge, it solidifies a narrow regime of truth that marginalizes alternative perspectives, and it imposes standards that enforce conformity rather than encourage innovation. Gatekeeping disguises the exercise of power by presenting exclusionary practices as neutral, procedural decisions. With this Foucauldian critique in mind, we can now turn to examine how different organizational structures distribute authority and knowledge.

IV. ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

A. TRADITIONAL

One clear illustration of how organizational structures shape the exercise of power and knowledge is the traditional top-down hierarchy, where authority is concentrated and knowledge flows are tightly controlled. Traditional top-down hierarchies are structurally

designed to enable gatekeeping. Power is centralized in upper management, which means decisions, information, and resources flow in only one direction, which is from the top down.¹¹ This one-way communication restricts feedback loops and limits the ability of lower-level employees to contribute meaningfully to decision-making.¹² Rigid role boundaries further establish control, as responsibilities are compartmentalized and crossing lines of authority is discouraged. This fragmentation creates knowledge silos, where valuable information is isolated within specific departments or individuals. Gatekeeping is promoted in this structure, as those at the top occupy key points where communication and decision-making meet. They can determine what knowledge is seen, what voices are heard, and which ideas gain legitimacy. Therefore, gatekeeping becomes a predictable outcome of the organizational structure itself. Hierarchies normalize power inequalities, allowing those at the top to enforce exclusion with little accountability.¹³ This traditional top-down hierarchy exemplifies how structures themselves can lead to organizational corruption, where the moral integrity of decision-making is undermined by concentrated authority and a lack of transparency.

Traditional hierarchies embody Foucault’s power and knowledge dynamic by positioning those in authority to define not only decisions, but also what is considered valid knowledge. The centralization of power allows gatekeepers to legitimize certain ideas while dismissing others, reinforcing their authority through the very truths they produce and uphold. This hierarchical structure thus facilitates gatekeeping by allowing those in power to present selective decision-making as neutral or procedural, while in reality it serves to reinforce their own authority.

B. DEVELOPMENTAL

While traditional hierarchies impose gatekeeping through formal authority, developmental structures present a more fluid alternative that complicates the boundaries between empowerment and informal exclusion. Developmental structures, characterized by fluid roles, flexible authority, and adaptability to individual growth or project needs, present a compelling alternative to rigid hierarchies. By decentralizing decision-making and encouraging cross-functional collaboration, these systems can reduce formal gatekeeping mechanisms, as individuals are less likely to be blocked by fixed roles or linear

11 Dosi, Marengo, and Virgillito, “Hierarchies, Knowledge,” 382.

12 Mahmoudsalehi, Moradkhannejad, and Safari, “How Knowledge Management,” 526.

13 Rosenblatt, “Hierarchies, Power Inequalities,” 248.



approval processes.¹⁴ However, this same flexibility can inadvertently produce informal gatekeeping. Without clearly defined authority or accountability, influence often shifts to those with strong social capital or reputational leverage.¹⁵ As a result, access to decision-making may become dependent on interpersonal dynamics rather than transparent criteria, enabling exclusion through unwritten norms or peer validation. The developmental model loosens structural barriers, but it does not eliminate the conditions under which gatekeeping can thrive, it simply redistributes them.

Foucault's concept of regimes of truth helps explain how gatekeeping persists in developmental structures despite the absence of overt hierarchies. In these systems, power operates less through formal authority and more through shared norms, discourses, and expectations about what counts as credible or valuable. Rather than being enforced top-down, these "truths" are maintained and circulated within teams or communities, often through cultural fit, language, or unspoken standards of competence. Individuals internalize these truths as the basis for legitimacy, aligning their contributions with dominant expectations in order to be heard or accepted. This creates a subtler form of gatekeeping, where participation is filtered not by rank but by adherence to the regime's underlying values. Thus, even in decentralized structures, power continues to shape knowledge.

C. MIDDLE-UP-DOWN MANAGEMENT

Another widely discussed alternative to rigid hierarchies is the middle-up-down management structure, which seeks to balance top-level strategy with bottom-up knowledge creation by empowering middle managers as key facilitators. The middle-up-down structure, most notably articulated by Nonaka, promotes knowledge creation through collaboration between top leadership, middle management, and frontline employees.¹⁶ Middle managers act as knowledge enablers, translating strategic visions into actionable ideas and synthesizing input from multiple levels. This design helps prevent top-heavy gatekeeping by distributing authority and encouraging idea generation across the organization.¹⁷ However, the model is not immune to gatekeeping. Middle managers, while intended to bridge gaps, can become bottlenecks when they filter, delay, or reshape knowledge before it reaches leadership. Since they mediate both upward and

downward communication, their role can inadvertently centralize influence, especially when there is pressure to align input with organizational goals or norms. Therefore, while middle-up-down structures aim to democratize knowledge, they often relocate gatekeeping rather than eliminating it.

Foucault's concept of normalization offers a lens through which to understand the limitations of middle-up-down management. Although this structure promotes collaboration, it also relies on middle managers to define what ideas are feasible, valuable, or aligned with strategic objectives. In doing so, they often uphold implicit standards of what "legitimate" knowledge looks like within the organization. These expectations become internalized by employees, who learn to shape their contributions to fit perceived norms rather than challenge them. Over time, innovation may conform to a narrow range of accepted discourse, not because of explicit exclusion, but because of an internalized sense of what will be accepted. In this way, middle-up-down management enacts both explicit gatekeeping and normalization, as middle managers filter ideas while employees increasingly self-regulate to align with internalized standards of acceptability.

D. TABLE STRUCTURE

Given the ethical shortcomings of traditional, developmental, and middle-up-down structures, an alternative is needed, one that preserves coordination and expertise without enabling gatekeeping. The proposed table structure addresses this need by offering a model explicitly designed to prevent gatekeeping embedded in other organizational structures.

The table structure is a model for organizational design that reimagines authority, knowledge flow, and role clarity to actively prevent gatekeeping. In this model, the "legs" of the table represent specialized contributors, who are employees with focused expertise across different functional areas. These specialists are directly connected to the "tabletop," composed of mission-focused leaders from each specialty, who are responsible for guiding organizational vision and making strategic decisions. The "middle bar" of the table connects the legs horizontally rather than vertically, symbolizing middle management not as gatekeepers, but as coordinators who translate strategic vision into actionable tasks, while also facilitating cross-functional communication, resource sharing, and alignment without obstructing the flow of knowledge. Information moves multi directionally: vertically between specialists and leadership, and horizontally across departments via the middle bar. Role clarity is preserved through distinct functions, but decision-making is collaborative, with authority

¹⁴ Mahmoudsalehi, Moradkhannejad, and Safari, "How Knowledge Management," 519.

¹⁵ Dosi, Marengo, and Virgillito, "Hierarchies, Knowledge," 373.

¹⁶ Nonaka, "Dynamic Theory," 25.

¹⁷ Mahmoudsalehi, Moradkhannejad, and Safari, "How Knowledge Management," 521.



dispersed to prevent bottlenecks. This structure emphasizes accessibility, transparency, and knowledge flow, creating a system where ideas are not judged by hierarchy, but by relevance to the mission.

Unlike traditional hierarchies, where power and knowledge are centralized at the top, the table structure prevents gatekeeping by eliminating vertical bottlenecks and redistributing decision-making authority across clearly defined but interdependent roles. Middle managers no longer filter ideas through hierarchical channels; instead, they support coordination and amplify voices across the organization, removing the bottlenecks common in the middle-up-down model. Unlike developmental structures, which risk informal gatekeeping through social capital and unwritten norms, the table model embeds formal role divisions and collaborative protocols to maintain balance without losing flexibility. Finally, while the middle-up-down structure relies on middle managers to translate and normalize knowledge, often filtering out dissenting ideas, the table structure preserves diverse input by granting specialists direct access to top-level leadership. With bidirectional knowledge flow and collaboration, this model challenges the conditions under which gatekeeping thrives. Rather than centralized authority, this intentional structure protects transparency and distributes intellectual empowerment. Critics may argue this model sacrifices efficiency for inclusion; however, the table structure increases speed by removing information lag and replacing hierarchical bottlenecks with real-time, distributed expertise. This alignment ensures that the organization remains mission-centered.

V. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, gatekeeping is an inherent structural ethical violation rooted in how organizations distribute power and knowledge. As this paper has shown, the ethical consequences of gatekeeping, particularly its violations of autonomy, justice, fidelity, and veracity, as well as Foucault's concepts of power and knowledge, normalization, and regimes of truth reveal how control over knowledge becomes a mechanism of domination that shapes what is seen, said, and valued. While traditional, developmental, and middle-up-down structures each reproduce exclusion in different ways, the table structure offers a principled alternative. By fostering multidirectional knowledge flow, structural transparency, and mission-centered collaboration, it resists normalization and prevents control from consolidating in any one layer. This aligns practical function with ethical responsibility, offering

an efficient and just model. Though this research has primarily examined gatekeeping through a corporate lens, future studies should explore how the table structure could be adapted to other institutions, such as prisons, healthcare systems, and educational environments, where the stakes of exclusion are equally, if not more, profound. When truth is shaped by power, redesigning organizations becomes an ethical necessity.





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