

Difference Between Chain of Command and Span of Control

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Key Difference - Chain of Command vs Span of Control

Chain of command and span of control are two important aspects in an organization related to organizational hierarchy. Both terms may be confused as one and used interchangeably due to their similarities in objective, which is to ensure that [human capital](#) within the organization is managed effectively. The key difference between chain of command and span of control is that **chain of command refers to levels of authority in a company** whereas **span of control is the number of subordinates a manager is responsible for controlling**.

What is Chain Of Command?

Chain of command refers to the levels of authority in a company, i.e. how the organizational hierarchy is designed. Chain of command is important to understand who reports to whom. In the organizational hierarchy, each position is connected to one above it from top to bottom. The way authority is flowing in a vertical line, position to position, reveals the chain of command. The chain of command not only establishes accountability, it lays out a company's lines of authority and [decision-making](#) power. Chain of command can be easily understood by looking at the organizational chart, which illustrates the company's structure.

E.g. As per the following diagram, the chain of command is disseminated using three layers where subordinates report to [managers](#) and the managers' report to the [CEO](#).

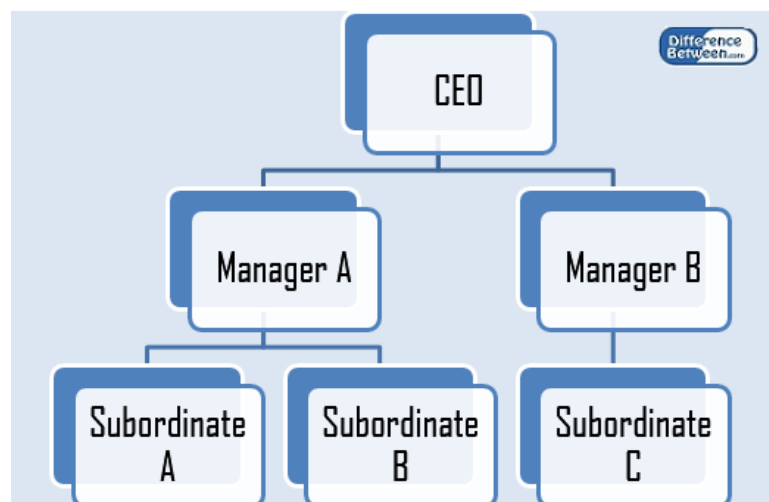


Figure 01: Chain of Command

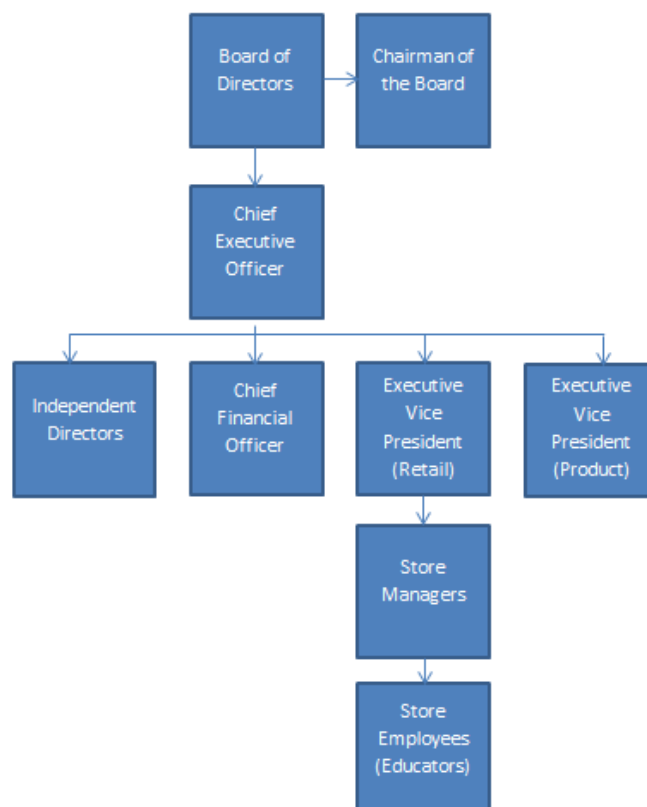
The chain of command establishes clear lines of authority, accountability, and responsibility enabling decision making power. A well-established chain of command is a priority to ensure that tasks are completed in a timely manner where subordinates take responsibility for their actions. This also assists managers in evaluating employee performance since the chain of command is considered in preparing job descriptions. However, employee flexibility and the ability to make decisions fast also are very important at times where it is necessary to serve the customers in a timely manner. Thus, the managers should be accessible to subordinates at all times.

What is Span of Control?

Span of control is the number of subordinates a manager is responsible for controlling. Span of control is principally decided based on whether the company adopts a [tall or flat organizational structure](#).

Tall Structure

In a tall structure, the span of control is narrow. High control, ease of supervision of the work of subordinates and more opportunities for promotion are core advantages of a narrow span of control. However, the speed of decision making is slow due to the many layers of management and may cause communication issues and delays. Therefore it may be difficult for some market-oriented firms to operate with a narrow span of control and efficiently cater to customer demand in a timely manner. Tall structures are commonly seen in [public sector](#) organizations.



Flat Structure

Flat structure is characterized by a wide span of control, thus there are a limited number of levels of hierarchy. Since the number of employees reporting to one manager is high, more work is delegated to subordinates which in turn increase their responsibility and motivation, providing a sense of autonomy. Decision making is fast in nature with a flat structure and is highly responsive to the changes in the market. However, the workload for managers may be excessive with a wide span of control and issues of direct supervision may arise. From the perspective of the subordinates, there are fewer opportunities for promotion. The flat structure has become very popular in many companies and industries where time to market and [customer satisfaction](#) is a key deciding factor.

In addition to the organization structure, the size of the organization also affects the span of control where many subordinates report to one manager and there is a scarcity of personnel with managerial skills.

What is the difference between Chain of Command and Span of Control?

Chain of Command vs Span of Control	
Chain of command refers to levels of authority in a company (design of organizational hierarchy)	Span of control is the number of subordinates a manager is responsible for controlling.
Nature	
Chain of command decides who report to whom.	Span of control is based on the manager-subordinate ratio.
Dependency	
Chain of command depends on the organizational hierarchy.	Span of control mainly depends on the nature of the customer base and industry.

Summary- Chain of Command vs Span of Control

The difference between chain of command and span of control depends on the levels of authority in a company (chain of command) and the number of subordinates a manager is responsible for supervising (span of control). Despite the differences, both chain of command and span of control is designated to achieve a similar objective, which is to ensure that subordinates are held accountable for their duties and can reach their managers when they want to discuss any matters due to various organizational differences.

References:

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1. "Lululemon Formal Organizational Structure Chart" By Tdotolson - Own work ([CC BY-SA 3.0](#)) via [Commons Wikimedia](#)

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APA: Difference Between Chain of Command and Span of Control. (2017, June 06). Retrieved (date), from <http://www.differencebetween.com/difference-between-chain-of-command-and-vs-span-of-control/>

MLA: "Difference Between Chain of Command and Span of Control." *Difference Between.Com*. 06 July 2017. Web.

Chicago: "Difference Between Chain of Command and Span of Control." *Difference Between.Com*. <http://www.differencebetween.com/difference-between-chain-of-command-and-vs-span-of-control/> (accessed [date]).



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