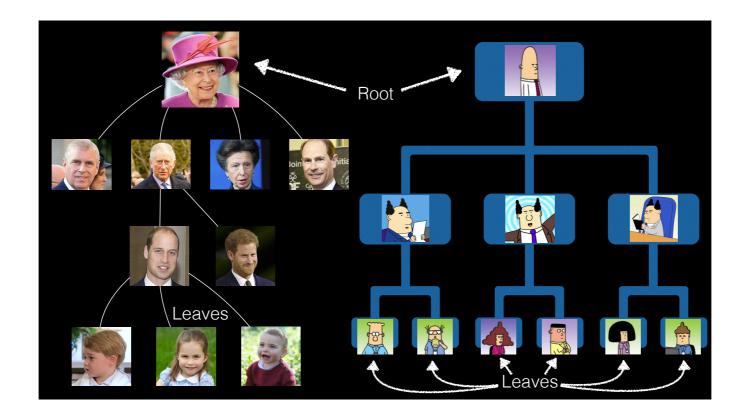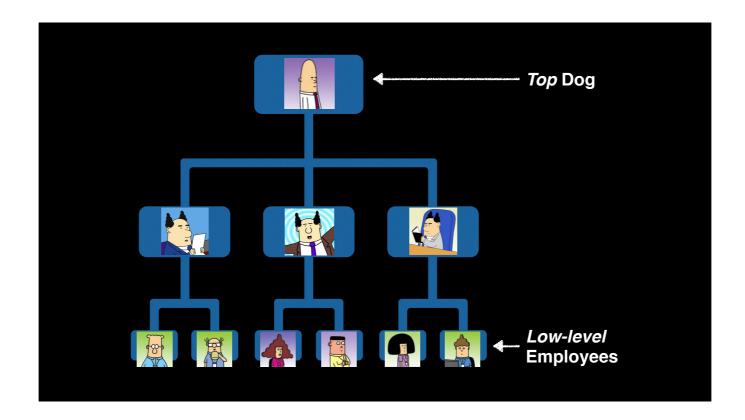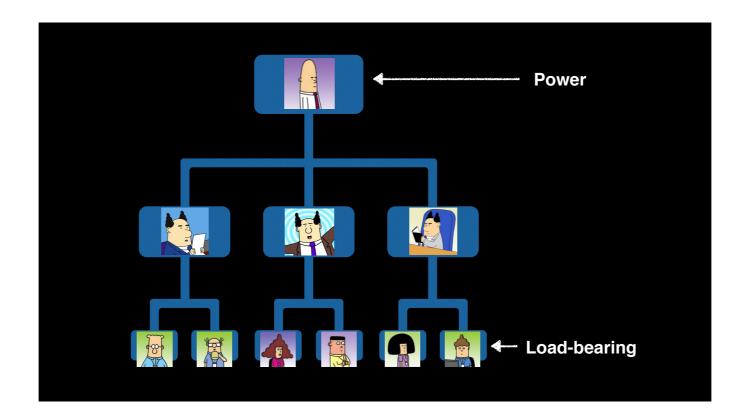I'm a computer scientist. One common CS data structure is called a tree. Trees are made up of nodes; each node has one parent and zero or more children. The node with no parent is called the root. The nodes with no children are called leaves.
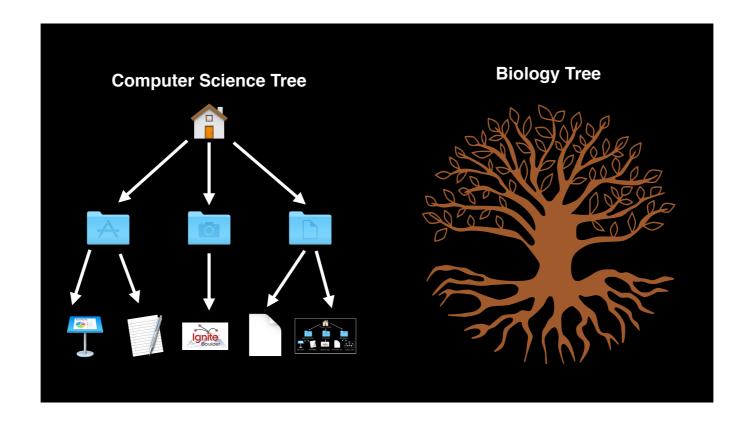
We draw the root at the top and the leaves at the bottom, probably because we start writing at the top of the page and don't know how big it will get.

Trees are used to represent hierarchies like family trees and organization charts.
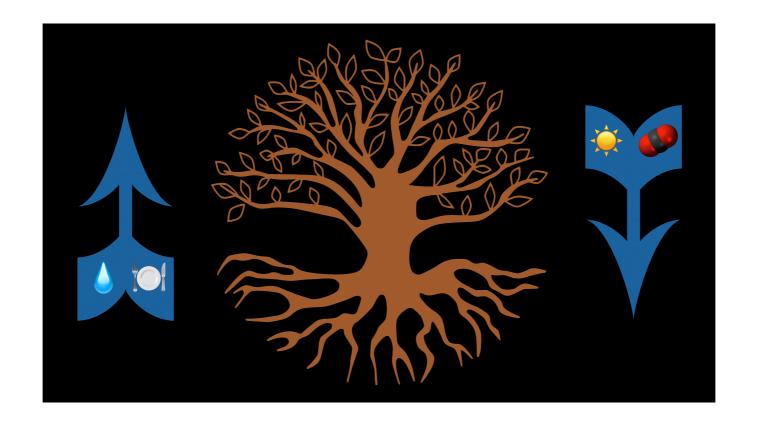
A typical org chart looks kind of like a pyramid, with the executives on the top and the frontline employees who do all the actual work at the bottom. In English there's an implied value between the words "top" and "up" and "bottom" and "low".

This pyramid organization structure implies that all the value and power sits at the top with the executive team while the frontline employees are the bricks at the bottom of the pyramid, bearing the weight of the whole structure.

Now when a biologist draws a tree, they draw it with the root at the bottom and the leaves at the top. And the root isn't just a single node, but a whole structure that keeps the tree from falling over.

In a biology tree the function of the roots is to bring water and nutrients up from the soil and distribute them to the parts of the tree that need them. And the purpose of leaves is to interact with the environment, bringing sunlight and carbon dioxide into the tree.

So what if we took the same org chart and flipped it upside down like a biology tree so the root of the tree is at the bottom and the leaves are at the top?

The frontline employees are now the leaves, moving freely and interacting with the people the organization serves. They have a lot of flexibility and easy access to the environment.
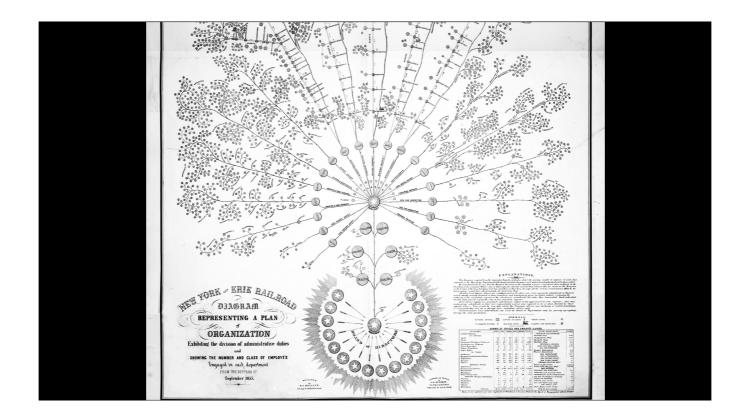
In this model management consists in increasingly thick branches whose purpose is to support the leaves and branches above them.
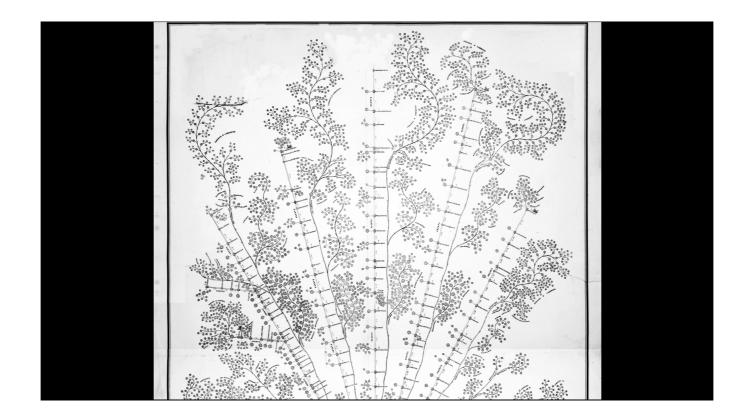
The trunk of the tree isn't just bigger management, but a whole support structure of teams that keep the organization running and prevent the team from falling over. Think of the IT department, project managers, HR, and the legal team.

And the executive team and board of the directors are down in the dirt where they won't get too big of an ego. Their job is to pull resources from the soil so ensuring the tree has the nutrients it needs to flourish.

This might sound like a radical idea, but the first org chart ever put to paper was also shaped like a tree. The New York–Erie Railroad needed to understand the flow of information and resources between regional branches and central coordinators.
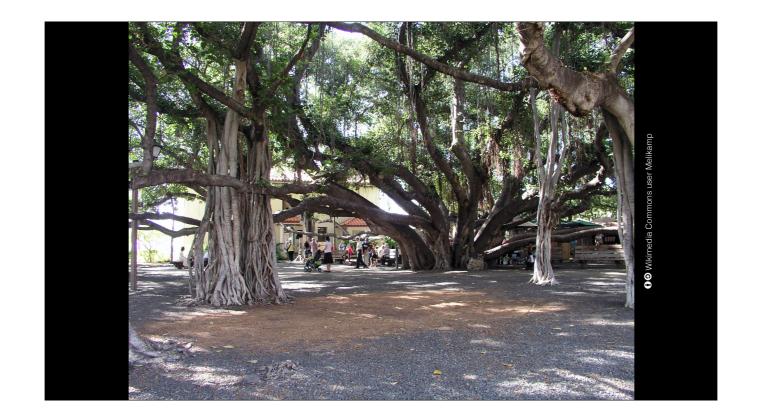
The curly leaves and branches show that the branch managers have freedom to handle local situations while the executives and board at the roots send money and rail cars to the branches that need them.
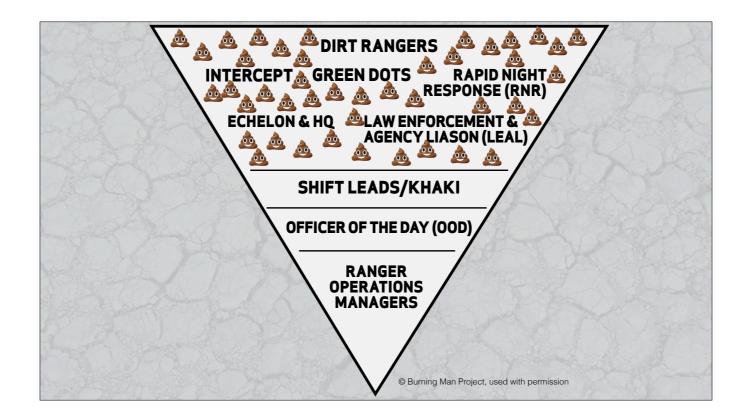
There are several advantages to this model of org chart as biology tree. First, frontline employees can come and go as the seasons change, people grow, and needs shift.
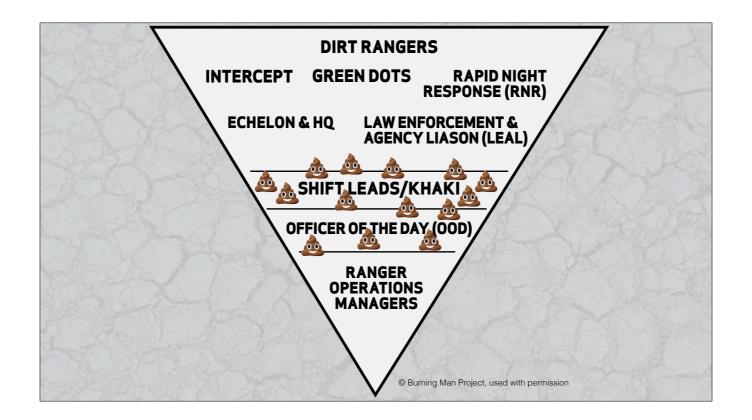
Without a rigid rigid upper structure, branches can grow in unique directions to overcome the challenges faced in that particular part of the organization.
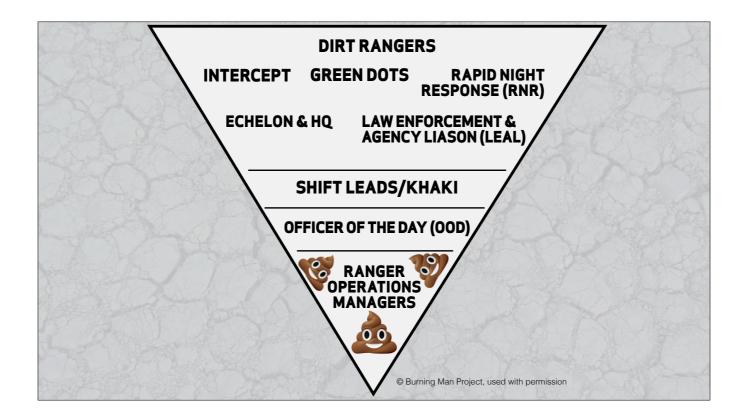
And if your org gets too big, you can become a banyan tree. These massive trees grow additional trunks to support a part of the tree without relying on the central trunk.

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My experience with an inverted org chart is with the Black Rock Rangers at Burning Man. We're a volunteer safety organization. Rather than a tree we use a poop funnel as a metaphor. The poop comes in at the top of the funnel where the frontline volunteers, many very new, deal with situations as they arise.

DIRT RANGERS

INTERCEPT   GREEN DOTS   RAPID NIGHT
                            RESPONSE (RNR)

ECHELON & HQ   LAW ENFORCEMENT &
                AGENCY LIASON (LEAL)

SHIFT LEADS/KHAKI

OFFICER OF THE DAY (OOD)

RANGER
OPERATIONS
MANAGERS

If a frontline volunteer can't deal with a situation, they let it pass down the poop funnel to the shift leads. These are experienced volunteers who can bring more resources to bear on the problem.

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And the really stinky, nastiest, grossest poop slides further down the poop funnel to the operations managers. They have a whole lot of experience in solving messy problems.

Now while it might seem like half the people at Ignite are start-up founders, you don't have to be a manager to apply this idea. Draw your own org chart: do you have the support that you need? Do you have the flexibility you desire?