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Questioning Bureaucracy

Beyond Weber, Argyris, and Bennis

Bureaucracy has a long history. The dynasties of China and the Roman Catholic Church are examples of this social phenomenon. It is only in the last fifty years (following Max Weber's examination of bureaucracy as a concept) that it has become the basis of substantial discussion. Many believe that bureaucratic structures are sources of problems in all levels of today's society.

In response to questions raised by his graduate students, the author shares his views on the subject and supports these with a broad review of the relevant literature. While it seems unclear whether bureaucracy in inherent in man's nature or results from socialization, it is assumed to be inevitable. Bureaucracy incorporates a multitude of elements; it is geared to order and efficiency, and it seems to be suited to certain types of individuals. However, it involves significant drawbacks. Bureaucratic operations are not always conducive to humane personal relations. Most bureaucratic models, (including the educational one) appear to be resistant to creativity and innovation.

A few writers foresee the emergence of some alternate organizational form of a more "adaptive" nature. Toffler for instance, talks of the "Ad-hocracies of tomorrow." As few of these ideas are practice-oriented, they may stimulate imagination but little essential change in the present bureaucratic trends.

Universities are also subject to the problems of a bureaucracy, particularly when business values take precedence over academic values in the solution of every day problems.

In the final analysis, it seems that the well-being of people working within bureaucratic structures can be protected provided there is concerted effort to revitalize institutions through humanistic awareness, the selection of excellent leaders, and continual questioning.

Many people believe that bureaucratic structures are problematic for today's society, and there is no lack of evidence to support this belief. Entire countries sometimes break down under the weight of their own bureaucracies; there are frequent stalemates in organizational contract bargaining; but, what is more meaningful and important, a great many individual employees arrive home each day feeling frustrated, angry, and helpless because of what "my job is doing to me". Some probing questions must be asked in order to gain some insight into how the well-being of people working in bureaucracies can be protected.

Bureaucracy defined

Most of the literature on bureaucracy begins with some reference to Max Weber's "ideal-type" construct. Some fifty years ago Weber stated that the following organizing principles maximize rational decision-making and administrative efficiency; the use of a division of labour and specific allocations of responsibility; a well-defined hierarchy of authority; administrative thought and action based on written policies, rules, and regulations; an impersonal, universalistic application of the bureaucratic environment to all inhabitants; and promotion and selection based on technical competence (quoted in Gerth and Mills 1946). Over the years many have criticized Weber's ideas, claiming inconsistencies and conflicting tendencies in his presentation. His failure to discuss dysfunctions, and the informal relations and unofficial patterns which develop in formal organizations, have been highlighted in particular (Gouldner, 1954; Merton, 1968; Parsons in Weber, 1947; Selznick, 1948).

Weber's academic and well-expressed ideas have become the basis of the literature, but it is important to realize that bureaucracies existed and were described well before Weber's time. The Dynasties of China, the armies of earlier civilizations, and the Roman Catholic Church are some examples (Steinberg, 1975). Despite the weaknesses in Weber's conceptions, he has made an outstanding contribution simply by stimulating further analyses of bureaucracy.

Today, the study of bureaucracy incorporates a multitude of elements: goal-setting, structure, power, authority, control, influence, communication, decision-making, motivation, leadership, team-building, conflict, effectiveness and efficiency, contracts, evaluation, change, climate, inter-organizational relationships and the institution-society interface. Basic approaches abound, as well, such as the scientific management, human relations, structuralist, systems, and phenomenological approaches. Finally, many "catch phrases" have emerged to describe bureaucratic processes — line and staff, the Peter Principle, satisficing (Simon). Murphy's Law, "Those who can't...". zone of indifference (Bridges), and the halo, Groupthink, and Doppelganger effects — to list a few. Some bureaucrats have decided, "When in doubt, mumble".

*Question 1: Is bureaucracy the inevitable organizational structure
which individuals will form?*

It is intriguing to consider the question whether bureaucratic structures are inherent in man's nature or whether there are other, more natural organizational patterns. Without a doubt, bureaucracy involves some individuals leading and others being led. It involves competition, the application and enforcement of rules and regulations, and the emphasis by management on logic and on being motivated by rational, economic considerations in order to attain efficiency and effectiveness. Under this type of system the individual receives concrete guidance as to his or her responsibilities, and a steady, known remuneration. Direction and security are provided.

Indeed, it is difficult to find a group of people who are organized in other than a bureaucratic fashion, which is to say without a hierarchy of authority, without job specialization, and without rules and regulations. It might be argued that certain religious societies such as the Hutterites deviate from the norms of the typical bureaucracy, but even here its processes can be identified. The elders of the community constitute the authority, rules and regulations are contained in the Bible and in the traditions of the society, and job specialization exists in a general sense, though dependent on the needs of the community rather than on the skills of the individual.

In 1971 the author conducted an experiment with a group of Canadian Indians and Eskimos in order to examine certain possibilities in social structures. The native group was asked to imagine that they had been involved in a plane crash over a lake, as a result of which they all arrived on an island where they could expect to remain for a long time. The question was posed: "What would you do as a group?"

Initially, the group indicated that they would structure themselves more or less bureaucratically, forming committees to satisfy various personal and communal needs. These included a committee to hunt for food, a firewood committee, a water committee, a housing committee, a social committee, and later on an education committee. Some suggested that there would have to be a specific set of rules for behaviour and a police force so that members would not shirk work. It was felt that a defence force, good foreign relations, and some plan of conservation of resources were necessary [Many of these ideas can be tied to theories of human needs, motivation and informal organization (Etzioni, 1964; Lane, Corwin and Monahan, 1971; Maslow, 1962)].

Gradually however, the group showed a potential for organizing non-bureaucratically. One member spoke of not having a leader, on the somewhat peculiar grounds that this could produce mutiny later on. Others mentioned that they would not necessarily have a hunting committee; if one person killed an animal, all would share it as food. One member said, "I don't think we would really set up the society like we did. Indians would just *know* how to survive under these conditions." Yet in the main the suggested organization was bureaucratic in nature.

Blau (1962) explains that there are particular historical conditions within a given social structure which push men toward bureaucratic structures. A money economy with its payment of regular salaries creates a combination of dependence and independence in employees which is conducive to perpetuating bureaucracy. The sheer size of an organization and the emergence of special, complex administrative problems encourages the development of bureaucracies. Further, capitalism and religion both encourage it: the former, to be effective, requires governments to maintain order and stability; the latter, with its basis of rational discipline, fuels bureaucratic structure. And if men seek optimum efficiency in organization, which they ideally do, they will lean toward bureaucracy if Weber's view is valid.

In the final analysis it remains unclear whether bureaucracy is inherent in man's nature or whether it is the result of centuries of socialization, but in either case the fair answer to a question about the inevitability of bureaucratic structure seems to be "Yes, it is inevitable."

Question 2: Are there significant relationships between the concepts of bureaucracy and democracy?

On the surface it might appear that the broad, democratic society, with its emphasis on human freedom and the rights of the individual, is irreconcilable with the regimentation, the restrictions, and the impersonality of bureaucracy.

Bennis and Slater (1968) give an opinion on the question. They argue that democracy is inevitable but that bureaucracy is not. "[E]very age develops an organizational form appropriate to its genius, and . . .the prevailing form . . .bureaucracy . . .is out of joint with contemporary realities." (p. 54) Thus there is an incongruency which these authors suggest must be remedied. In somewhat of a contrast, Blau (1962) states that the free enterprise system of democracy fosters the development of bureaucracy. "The interest of capitalism demands . . .the establishment of governments strong enough to maintain order and stability". (p. 38) Further, it is often argued that the climate of impersonal detachment within bureaucracy engenders equitable treatment of all persons, thus fostering democracy. (Blau, 1962, p. 30) An example here would be the practice of the administrator who tells any employee who approaches him, asking for resources to try out a creative idea, "No, if I do it for you then I'll have to

do it for everyone else who comes along." This may be practising democracy, but it would be stifling innovation.

Many would disagree that democracy is inevitable; in fact they might say that the opposite is true. From the discussion under Question One we would infer that bureaucracy is inevitable. It is suggested that bureaucracy and democracy in juxtaposition are contradictory, and yet bureaucracy does exist within democracy. It flourishes, in fact, as it has flourished throughout history in every conceivable form of government, from communist dictatorships to absolute monarchies to anarcho-syndicalist collectives. It seems, then, there is no significant relationship between bureaucracy and any type of government. It is perhaps true that democracy functions within bureaucracy rather than the other way around. Democracy, communism, monarchies, and so forth are not all-pervasive, whereas bureaucracy is, and it might well be that the survival of any type of government is dependent on its ability to function within a framework of bureaucracy.

Finally, of course, bureaucrats of communist countries might explain the relationship between democracy and bureaucracy as strong bureaucratic institutions being necessary for control in an interim stage leading to a true democratic society.

Question 3: How possible are the ideals of human relations approach, such as autonomy, self-realization, trust, and openness, in the typical organization?

The general flavour of the administration literature in recent years has been of "humanistic approaches." Griffith's new text *Administrative Theory in Education: Text and Readings* (1979) and *The New School Executive: A Theory of Administration* by Sergiovanni and Carver (1979) are cases in point. Argyris *(in Hack, et al.,* 1971) emphasizes the need to integrate the individual and the organization. Yet in the day-to-day operation of our institutions (bureaucracies) a multitude of workers are frustrated by the lack of humane and fair treatment. Many would say that the human relations approach is not realistic in today's organizations. In fact, some would argue that the principles of Taylor's impersonal, mechanistic, scientific management still abound.

Just how possible human relations are would seem to depend on the purposes (and technology) and size of an organization. Blau and Scott [in Carver and Sergiovanni (1969)] describe various purposes for formal organizations: economic, political, religious, educational, public service, and so on. (p. 13) Logically, one would expect a more humanistic climate in the service/people oriented institutions as opposed to the production/object oriented. One would also expect a correlation between the size of the institution and the extent of bureaucratization and hence the amount of depersonalization, as for example when the individual worker becomes increasingly remote from the head of the organization. Further, in these times, greater size of institution implies more

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continuous evaluation of staff and activities, which in turn is often associated with "dehumanization." On the other hand, in very large bureaucracies, increased humanism is possible within smaller subdivisions, especially through the impact of informal groupings.

To answer the question posed, it must be appreciated that different degrees of the human relations approach are possible at different levels of the organization, and a distinction must be made between the hypocritical "window-dressing" type of humanistic practices and those of the sincere, pervading type. (see Drucker, 1980, p. 193)

Question 4: What about bureaucratic organization and change and innovation?

Many argue that the very character of bureaucracy makes it resistant to change and innovation. For instance, Abbott (1969) and Hanson (1979) state that an organizational hierarchy has a natural tendency to slow down the process of change. Kimbrough and Todd (in Heald, 1970) mention that school bureaucracies generally lack the willingness to expand and to probe the unknown. (p. 418) Several specific points about this bureaucracy are listed: the inability to legitimize differences in ideas among personnel depresses creativity; new ideas generated from within are often vetoed by members of the official hierarchy, especially if they are in conflict with perceived rational teaching behaviour; there is an inadequate structure and process for the review of decisions in the bureaucracy; the extrinsic reward system stimulates conformity rather than innovations; the prior commitments of organizational resources to subunits within the organization make it difficult to develop innovative solutions for new problems; and the lines of communication are often closed because of hierarchical divisions. (p. 420) Many theorists believe that until tendencies such as these are reversed, change and innovation will be difficult.

However, other individuals believe that in recent years the educational bureaucracy has been amply open to, and involved in, change and innovation. Witness the pluralism, the collegial relations in decision making, the community participation, and the general decentralization thrusts in school systems. "Grassroots" curriculum development is a good example. The level of the bureaucracy on which we are focussing again, becomes important in considering whether bureaucracy stimulates or inhibits change and innovation.

It is true, though, that real and seemingly-real intentions and results must be carefully distinguished.

Question 5: How is the study of bureaucracy useful for the educational practitioner?

Bureaucratic theory provides the practitioner with a tool for the understanding of his or her environment. He is able to dissect situations and to

become more aware of where he fits in the hierarchy. The theory includes discussion of change, morale, power, leadership, communications, and decision-making; it provides the practitioner with ideas to sharpen his skills.

The historical development of bureaucratic theory enlightens the practitioner as to the various possible approaches to managing: Scientific Management, Human Relations, Structuralist, Systems, etc. He can learn in which situations to use which approach. Moreover, one learns through the theory how one is socialized into organizational roles. Thus there is an increase in self-awareness.

On the value of a systems approach to a school administrator, Griffith (1979) says the following:

> It is a model or conceptual analogue for examining the way a school functions. It indicates that a school is a suprasystem composed of interrelated and interdependent subsystems and that the boundaries of these subsystems must be clearly demarcated to prevent duplication and waste . . .
>
> Systems theory is also a theory base for research, a framework around which an investigator can organize his observations and thinking. It is a guide by which school personnel can bring about curricular change and improve the quality of a school's service to its students and community. Finally, it is a method of budgeting and evaluation, of determining the financial needs of each component and of assessing the relationships between input and output. (pp. 31-32)

So the systems component of bureaucratic theory would seem to be potentially very useful. Generally, the study of bureaucracy brings understanding for the practitioner, resulting in valuable insights into accountability phenomena and style. The theory helps the practitioner to formulate questions to be answered about his or her organization, and knowing the questions is usually more than half the battle. Directions about how to change and innovate emerge. And important ideas appear about what is sometimes referred to as "coping effectively with difficult people".

Bureaucratic organization has been with us for some time and there is no evidence to suggest that it will not continue for some time to come. While it does provide order and a degree of efficiency, there are critical drawbacks to such a structure. The well-being of employees is not what it should be. Bureaucracies may be admirably suited to those individuals who need clearcut directions and rewards in a work situation, but at the same time they can stifle the creativity and initiative of others. All bureaucracies, including the educational one, appear to be resistant to change and innovation.

Many employees do not enjoy their jobs. They get frustrated with the oppression of the bureaucracy. It is a problem of a deficient integration of the individual's needs, interests, and potentials with the goals of the organization (Argyris, 1966). C. Wright Mills explains the "floating paranoia" which sets into

people who feel little control over their job situation. Specifically, there is often poor leadership; management holds too much power in too many organizations. As a result, we see insufficient communication, inappropriate reward systems, and poor morale. Too many people get into positions of management which they cannot handle and this sets off a multitude of difficulties: cutting of corners, too many meetings, temper tantrums, loss of sight of organizational goals and of sound , proven value bases from which to operate, loss of interest in employees' needs, and generally a resorting to personal survival practices. Many managers appear to become almost psychotic. And well-meaning, capable employees must suffer the consequences. Workers are often ordered to do as they are told and to not ask any questions. Most important, these kinds of things discourage excellent people from joining the organization. It is a complex situation which will not be overcome easily — but choosing excellent leaders is the starting point.

Several writers see the elimination of bureaucracy and the creation of an alternative organizational form as necessary in the future. Bennis (1966) feels that rapid and unexpected change, overwhelming organizational size, the complexity of modern technology, and an enlightened managerial approach will lead to the following:

> Adaptive, problem-solving, temporary systems of diverse specialists, linked together by coordinating and task-evaluating executive specialists in an organic flux — this is the organization form that will gradually replace bureaucracy as we know it . . .I call this an organic-adaptive structure. (p. 265)

Argyris states that in the organization of the future, "[T]he concept of directive authority or power will be expanded to include the influence of individuals, through rewards and penalties that minimize dependence, through internal commitment, and through the process of confirmation." (p. 273) Toffler addresses specifically the educational bureaucracy:

> The present administrative structures of education, based on industrial bureaucracy, will simply not be able to cope with the complexities and rate of change . . .They will be forced to move toward ad-hocratic forms of organization merely to retain some semblance of control . . .Super-industrial education must prepare people to function in temporary organizations — the Adhocracies of tomorrow. (p. 408)

Many writers have attempted to explain deep, profound forces which are at work in society (*The Hidden Persuaders, Battle for the Mind, The Brain Watchers)* and others have described a total society of the future, such as *Brave New World* and *1984.* Andrews and Karlins (1971) envision a "psytocracy", a society where all things, including people "things", are subject to careful and precise technical manipulation. (p. 53)

I am not so hopeful that the bureaucratic structures of the future will be much different from those of today. Imaginative futurists and analysts stimulate our thinking, but few of their ideas are practice-oriented. They ignore too much

the key "people" side of things. People have basic needs, especially the need for security, and they will not accept extended oppression and manipulation passively.

For instance, Bennis and Slater (1968) missed something very crucial in their projections about the future organic/temporary work situation. They did not anticipate that employees in the 1970's and would become militant and take initiatives to protect their job security through collective agreements. This is the reality nowhere mentioned in many other futurists' arguments. Granted, such things as automation and computers will alter — in fact are already beginning to alter — the nature of bureaucracies, but people are bound to protect their self-interest. The Polish workers' assertiveness is a more recent exmaple. Changing the ownership of organizations from private to public, including having employees as owners, is another alteration we are seeing in bureaucracies. (Doig, 1975) This is more conducive to worker self-interest, yet it is doubtful whether the change produces an alleviation of the common organizational problems. (Argyris, 1966, p. 277) The particular purposes and ownership of a bureaucracy influence its general internal climate and the extent to which the afore-mentioned problems are present. Unlike business organizations, educational organizations have a "guaranteed existence" through society's tax money and support. In my view this results in less caring about inefficiencies and in poor leadership in the system. I see serious, immense problems along the following lines for universities:

1. There is not enough sharing of the same ideas about the purpose of the university. One result is that business values often take precedence over academic values.

2. Too many administrators work from a business base rather than from an academic base. Term appointment of new faculty, stemming from supposedly declining student enrolments, is an example of a business practice. It exploits people, effects poor morale, and works against academic freedom.

3. The current promotion and tenure system tends to foster misunder-standing, jealousy, and disagreement about criteria. As a result, many good academics decide to emphasize serving the profession rather than their par-ticular university.

4. The educational bureaucracy of today contributes to poor health in its employees. University administrators appear to lack insight and sensitivity con-cerning the way experience and stress take their toll on a normal employee. The bureaucracy often fails to provide enough security for older employees.

5. The "gloom and doom" attitudes and the use of undesirable value bases which currently abound in educational bureaucracies are contagious. Again, it keeps "good" people from wanting to join.

In 1887 Woodrow Wilson, in his essay "The study of Administration", argued that executive method should be based on stable principles rather than empiricism. Currently in our institutions this is not enough the case. Bureaucracies need to hire the very best people they can get. There is a great need for disciplined, decent leaders who apply common sense and have a deep regard for their employees. We need leaders of expert vision who are capable of courageous acts. (Perrow, 1973, p. 13) Leaders are needed who believe that the great majority of workers *want* to do well, *are* responsible, and, if the organizational situation is right, *will* perform well.

We are an organizational society. (Presthus, 1962) In recent years we have become a collective bargaining and legalistic-oriented society. With our expanding knowledge in such areas as organizational psychology, organization development, and career development [e.g., Mayer (1978); Schein (1978)] it is possible to make bureaucracies enjoyable places for people to work, and let's face it, work is a very important aspect of one's life. Currently, many institutions are breaking the spirit of workers and harming families. At work the onus seems to be on the employee to save himself. Obviously this is wrong. The potential is with us to put our knowledge to work to truly humanize bureaucracies and, as Bennis (1966) says, generally to revitalize our institutions. (p. 262) This begins with a continual questioning of the bureaucracy.

NOTES

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