

Bureaucracy in University Management

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When I was in graduate school studying school administration I was shocked to have bureaucracy presented as a solution to potential problems. In my life bureaucracy was always regarded as the cause of many of the problems we face in the United States. Seeing it as a preventer of problems was a totally new experience. As the class continued and bureaucracy was explained better I began to see the logic.

Around the turn of the twentieth century Max Weber introduced his theory of bureaucracy. In this theory he analyzes the problem of getting acceptable work out of marginally competent and incompetent people. His idea was to have leaders set policy for the workers to follow. Detailed instructions of how to do the work are provided to the workers, and they are then able to do good work simply by following the prescribed policies.

This seems like such a logical idea that it made me wonder why bureaucracy has such a bad reputation in the USA. Why doesn't it work? Horror stories about the failures of bureaucracy abound in the US. My life experience has shown me that horrible things happen when bureaucracies are given the authority to decide things.

As I thought about it for many hours, I finally realized the fatal flaw in Weber's logic. Weber assumes that the people who make the policies are

themselves competent. If the leader is wise and skillful, then the followers have good policy to follow and the enterprise prospers, whether the enterprise is a school, a company, or a government. On the other hand, if the leaders are not wise and skillful, the followers have to follow bad policy, and nothing works well.

As I continued to think about this topic, I realized there are many corollaries to this idea about incompetent policy-makers. In the US the bureaucracies usually evolve policy that protects the leaders from responsibility for flawed policy. In business, for example, only the CEOs are responsible, and they are responsible to the stockholders only for the profitability of the company. As long as the company makes money, bad policy will be overlooked. When the company loses money, the CEO is replaced, and the new CEO will change policies only enough to restore profitability, and thus much bad policy can remain. Many companies are irresponsible toward the environment, and this gets overlooked when the company is profitable.

Policies have a way of turning into traditions and one often hears, "We have always done it this way." This is seen as a good excuse for continuing bad policy. It fits well with a human desire to keep changes as small as possible. Incompetent policy makers often bury themselves in middle manage-

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ment positions, where they continue to add bad policy to more bad policy until at times a company will go bankrupt. You can probably think of several large corporations that are no more, and I am convinced that layers of bad policy contributed to their demise.

In the book *The Peter Principle* the author Laurence J. Peter suggests that in many companies people will be promoted until they reach a level where they cannot handle the job any more. At this point they will be promoted no more, thus causing many of the management jobs to be handled by people who are incompetent and interacting with the worst of bureaucracy. This also contributes to the demise of companies.

So, how can we make Max Weber's theory work? The first and most important principle is humility. I'm talking about a deep humility that goes deeper than just refusing to accept compliments, as important as that level of humility is. When we are policy-makers, we must doubt ourselves a little, realizing the flaws that exist in the system that we are using. Bureaucracy is taught as the answer in our US graduate schools and since possessors of advanced degrees are better educated than most people, we tend to believe that the answers we studied are better than they really are, and to regard people who do not like bureaucracy as uneducated and ignorant. A strong dose of humility is very important: critics can often show us failures in the policies we make.

We need to add to the humility vigilance against bad policy, whether it be from us or from others. We need to work into the system periodic reviews of policy. In Pennsylvania, there is a small town that passed a unique law to protect horses when automobiles were first invented. Anyone driving through town had to have someone on foot ahead of them with a lantern warning horse-owners that a car would soon be passing, so that the own-

ers could keep control over their horses. It is obvious that this law is badly out of date. Cars rarely backfire anymore and today's horses grow up around many cars and are used to them. The town has found another use for this law. When the money in the budget gets low, the police ticket people and make them pay a fine for breaking this law as a way of taxing any tourist who travels through the town. Periodic reviews of policy can remove outdated policies like this law, and prevent abuse of the people who are supposed to be being served.

There needs to be an appeals process that does not consist of merely deciding again that the policy requires that the matter be settled in a certain way; this appeal needs to actually question whether or not the policy is a good policy. In US government social service bureaucracies people who work there often talk about people who "fall between the cracks." People have a way of getting into unique situations that no policy addresses. There need to be a few competent people who have the responsibility of dealing with such people in those unique situations. Weber overlooked the need for at least a few competent people who can operate outside the labyrinth of policy.

Since bureaucracy is so problematical, why bother with it? There are a few good reasons. Weber's logic is good, and many people need guidance in their work endeavors. Setting a policy can keep you from having to make the same decision over and over. Then you can spend your time more efficiently dealing with new matters.

Having a set policy on matters can reduce friction between people. Since they already know what the decision will be, they do not spend your time debating with you about the decision, and they will not have hurt feelings, since it is obvious that the decision was not made with them in mind. This can free you from spending much time smoothing ruffled feathers.