Bureaucracy: Problems and Strategies for Overcoming It

by

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Abstract

The most common form of organizations today, burecucracy, is often misunderstood. The paper can be seen as an attempt to create a better understanding of the concept of bureaucracy. Not only is bureaucracy defined, but also various models and types of bureaucracy are described in detail. In particular, the problems of burecucracy and the proposed solutions of various scholars are put forward in the paper. While the paper cannot be regarded as a comprehensive review of the highly complex concept of bureaucracy, it does, I hope, offer some insights into the often misunderstood concept originated by Max Weber.

Introduction

Organizations are everywhere today. No matter who we are and no matter where we live, we cannot escape from organizations. We all belong to one kind of organization or the other. An organization may be defined as a system of consciously coordinated activities of two or more people. The most common form of organizations is bureaucracy. Various definitions of bureaucracy can be found. For some the term bureaucracy is synonymous with red tape and efficiency. For others, it refers to a public organization as opposed to a private one. Many have claimed that bureaucracy is dead or dying while others have talked about its virtues and its resilience in the face of adversity.

What exactly is bureaucracy? How does a bureaucratic organization differ from a non-bureaucratic one? What are the problems, if any, confronting Bureaucracy? How may they be overcome? These and other questions related to bureaucracy will be answered in this paper. The paper is divided into four parts - introduction, bureaucracy

and its problems, strategies for overcoming the problems of bureaucracy, and conclusion. It is hoped that the paper will enable the reader to have both a better understanding of the term bureaucracy and the problems confronting it. Since bureaucracy or bureaucratic organizations pervade every aspect of modern life, it is crucial for everyone concerned to have at least a working knowledge of bureaucracy and it is hoped that this paper will be of use to anyone with an interest in learning more about bureaucracy and bureaucratic organizations.

Bureaucracy and Its Problems

Definitions

Bureaucracy may be defined as a certain kind of formal organization, characterized by a complex administrative hierarchy, specializations of skills and tasks, prescribed limits on discretion set forth in a system of rules, impersonal behavior with regard to clientele, and separation of ownership and control.[1]

Max Weber's concept of bureaucracy is based on the notions of rationality and legality. There are seven characteristics of bureaucracy or a bureaucratic organization :

1. Division of labor. Each person's job is broken down into simple, routine, and well-defined tasks.

2. Well-defined authority hierarchy. A multilevel formal structure, with a hierarchy of positions or offices, ensures that each lower office is under the supervision and control of a higher one.

3. High formalization. Dependence on formal rules and procedures to ensure uniformity and to regulate the behavior of job holders.

4. Impersonal nature. Sanctions are applied uniformly and impersonally to avoid involvement with individual personalities and personal preferences of members.

5. Employment decision based on merit. Selection and promotion decisions are based on technical qualifications, competence, and performance of the candidates.

6. Career tracks for employees. Members are expected to pursue a career in the organization. In return for this career commitment, employees have tenure ; that is, they will be retained even if they 'burn out' or if their skills become obsolete.

7. Distinct separation of member's organizational and personal lives. The demands and interests of personal affairs are kept completely separate to prevent them from interfering with the rational

[1]Max Weber, "Bureaucracy (1922)", In Jay M. Shaftriz and Albert C. Hyde (eds.) Classics of Public Administration, Second Edition, Pacific Grove, California : Brooks / Cole, 1987. pp. 50-54.

impersonal conduct of the organization's activities.[2]

Models of Bureaucracy

We will consider three different models of bureaucracy developed within the academic disciplines of sociology, political economy and public administration respectively :

1. The sociology model,
2. The political - economy model, and
3. the public administration model.

In the sociology model, bureaucracy is seen as possessing general features common to organizations in all sectors of the modern society. The four main features cited by Weber and reiterated by Beetham are as follows :

1. Hierarchy (each official has a clearly defined competence within a hierarchical division of labor and is answerable for its performance to a superior).
2. Continuity (the office constitutes a full-time salaried occupation with a career structure that offers the prospect of regular advancement).
3. Impersonality (the work is conducted according to prescribed rules, without arbitrariness or favoritism, and a written record is kept of each transaction).
4. Expertise (Officials are selected according to merit, are trained for their function, and control access to the knowledge stored in the files)[3].

While organizational sociologists have no problems accepting Weber's definition of bureaucracy because it is clear, precise, and generalizable, they have trouble accepting Weber's claim that the closer an organization approximated to his model, the more efficient it was likely to be. Weber also claims that it was the superior efficiency of bureaucracy that accounted for it being adopted by all kinds of organizations from all aspects of society. This is also disputed by organizational sociologists.

Political economy approaches the study of bureaucracy from an economic point of view. It is concerned with the way organizations are financed, and with the effects the form of financing has upon the way they function. In the political economy model, therefore, bureaucracy is defined as an administrative hierarchy which is financed by a grant rather than by the sale of its product on the market. Such a grant may come from voluntary subscription or through compulsory taxation.

Since bureaucracies are financed by grants, they are not affected by the incentives and sanctions of 'markets'. In other words, it is almost impossible for them to go out of business. Thus, there is

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[2]Ibid. pp. 50 - 54.

[3]Beetham, David, Bureaucracy, Bristol : J.W. Arrowsmith, 1987. p. 12.

no pressure on those at the top to ensure strict supervision and to prevent 'feather-bedding' and ensure that the organization can be run effectively. Since senior bureaucrats can only increase their own benefits substantially through organizational expansion rather than organizational efficiency, many bureaucracies end up combining two apparently contradictory failings-chronic 'shirking' on the one hand and 'making work'[4] on the other.

The discipline of public administration approaches the study of bureaucracy from the point of view that only organizations in the public sector are true bureaucracies. The idea of the 'public' is given central emphasis so that words like efficiency, effectiveness and accountability take on a whole new meaning very different from the way they were interpreted in the previous models of bureaucracy. A distinguishing feature of the public administration model of bureaucracy is the political character of its services. Competing values replace the traditional demand for profitability.

Bureaucracy, in this sense, then is not a matter of carrying out goals set by the politician in the most efficient manner. It is a matter of administering policy in accordance with the values which have determined it, among which considerations of cost efficiency may have a smaller or a larger place. Policy and its administration are not rigidly separable. One example is the general requirement of public bureaucracies to treat cases alike, and to operate in a strictly rule-governed and impersonal manner. This is a requirement of a substantive value linked to the ideas about the rule of law and the equality of citizenship rights.

Types of Bureaucracy

James A. Medeiros and David E. Schmitt view bureaucracy within a framework of three categories : machine bureaucracy, humane bureaucracy, and political bureaucracy[5].

Bureaucracy may be seen as the most effective mechanism to accomplish complex goals. It can be viewed as analogous to a well-tuned machine. Bureaucracies are in part comparable to machines that use raw materials and transform them into some desired end product. Bureaucracies are designed to transform public sector inputs (ideas, personnel, money) into desired public products. This view of bureaucracy is in line with the view by Weber who observed that "Bureaucracy is like a modern judge, who is a vending machine into which the pleadings are inserted together with the fee and which then disgorges the judgment together with its reasons mechanically derived from the code"[6].

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[4]Ibid. p. 29.

[5]James A. Medeiros and David E. Schmitt, Public Bureaucracy , North Scituate, Massachusettss : Duxbury Press, 1977. p. 21.

[6]Max Weber qt. by James A. Medeiros and David E. Schmitt. Ibid. p. 21.

Many concerned with the impact of bureaucracies on individual needs would redesign the machine bureaucracy to achieve a more liberated and humane organizational arrangement. Those advocating humane bureaucracy strive for a more liberated worker, freed from the hierarchical and impersonal role positions that bureaucracies have traditionally imposed. As noted by Weber, "the individual bureaucrat cannot squirm out of the apparatus in which he is harnessed.... In the great majority of cases, he is only a single cog in an ever-moving mechanism which prescribes to him an essentially fixed route of march"[7].

Thus, humane bureaucracy is seen as a new form of flexible structure which will be better equipped to solve the complicated problems of the future and to give greater meaning and dignity to the individual within its rank.

Those advocating political bureaucracy see bureaucracy not as a closed system responsive only to its own needs but as a system responding to a diverse set of political values and interests. The key, here, is how to make the bureaucracy respond to all appropriate political values and interests. In other words, political bureaucracy has to be designed in such a way that it will always take into consideration the public interest at large rather than the narrow interests of large, well-established clientele groups. In short, then, political bureaucracy concerns itself with an essential requirement of democratic society - the need to view external demands and controls as a legitimate constraint as well as impetus for administrative actions.

Each approach has its own advantages and disadvantages as can be seen in the table 1.

Problems of Democracy

The foremost critic of bureaucracy, Warren Bennis, has this to say of bureaucracy :

> " The world no longer needs the machinelike organizations bureaucracy produces. The challenge of our times call for lively, intelligent organizations. Bureaucracy was efficient for certain kinds of repetitive tasks that characterized the early Industrial Revolution. It no longer works so well, because its rules and procedures are often diametrically opposed to the principles needed for workers to take the next step toward greater organizational intelligence."[8]

He goes on to cite the changing nature of work that has contributed directly to the downfall of bureaucracy at least in his opinion. (See figure 1).

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[7]Max Weber, qt. by James A. Medeiros and David E. Schmitt, Op. cit. p. 25.

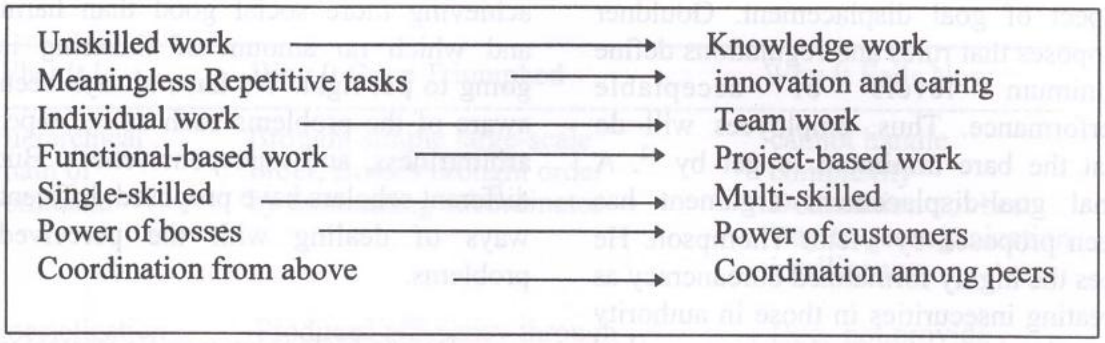
[8]Warren G. Bennis, "The Coming Death of Bureaucracy", Think , November -, December 1966, pp. 30 - 35.

Table 1 : The Problems of Bureaucracy : Three Contending Approaches [9]

	Machine	Humane	Political
	Increased organizational efficiency and mechanical effectiveness	Increase development of needs and values of employees	Increase accountability to plurality of political interests and to appropriate political institutions
Examples of commonly perceived problems	- competition between organizational units - ineffective management strategies - lack of efficiency - lack of evaluative measures - lack of technical skills	managerial/worker conflict loss of personal identity loss of civic identity lack of opportunities for participation	overcentralization of administration lack of accountability inadequacy of formal political control lack of adequate citizen redress for abuses
Suggested solutions	- reorganize - provide structural mechanism for inter and intra agency cooperation - measure agency productivity - manage by objectives - improve technical skills of employees	increase training efforts develop new managerial styles induce temporary organizations provide rotation schemes increase material and psychological rewards provide for employee bill of rights enrich jobs	improve legislative oversight establish little city halls establish ombudsmen decentralize
Benefits	- the application of skills and expertise in a non-political environment to achieve stated goals effectively and efficiently	the cooperative efforts of psychologically healthy personalities toward public goals	accountability to a diversity of citizen needs and to formal political centers

[9] James A. Mediros and David E. Schmitt.Op. cit. p. 22.

Figure 1.



Unfortunately or fortunately as the case may be, depending on how one feels about bureaucracy, Warren Bennis' proclamation that 'bureaucracy is dead' has been a bit premature to say the least. In spite of the predictions of Warren Bennis and many others like him, bureaucracy remains firmly in place and no real successor or serious rival has emerged to take its place. This does not mean bureaucracy has not changed. Indeed, it has been modified somewhat and humanized in some aspects. This, then, appears to be the trend for the future. That is, rather than looking for an elusive successor to bureaucracy, many are now content to concentrate on the strengths of bureaucracy and are looking for ways to minimize its weaknesses or perceived weaknesses. These so-called strategies to deal with the problems of bureaucracy will be discussed in more details in the next chapter.

Here are some of the perceived weaknesses or problems of bureaucracy as seen by Warren Bennis :

One of the major problems of bureaucracy is goal displacement or the displacement of organizational goals by subunit or personal goals. Robert Merton, for instance, points out that rules and regulations can become so emphasized that they take on a symbolic meaning of their own. The rules become more important than the ends they were designed to serve, the result being goal displacement and loss of organizational effectiveness[10]. Philip Selznick mentions another kind of goal displacement. He emphasized that specialization and differentiation can create subunits with different goals. The subunit goals may become more important than the organization's goals[11].

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[10]Robert K. Merton. "Bureaucratic Structure And Personality", Social Forces , May, 1940. pp. 560 - 568.

[11]Philip Selznick, qt. by Stephen P. Robbins, Organization Theory , Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey : Prentice Hall, 1990.p. 315

Alvin Gouldner highlights another aspect of goal displacement. Gouldner proposes that rules and regulations define minimum levels of acceptable performance. Thus, employees will do just the bare minimum to get by [12]. A final goal-displacement argument has been proposed by Victor Thompson. He sees the highly formalized bureaucracy as creating insecurities in those in authority that lead to what he has called 'bureaupathic behavior'[13]. Decision makers use adherence to rules to protect themselves from making errors. As persons in hierarchical positions become increasingly dependent upon lower level specialists for achievement of organizational goals, they tend to introduce more and more rules to protect themselves against this dependency.

Strategies For Dealing With The Problems of Democracy

Bureaucracy, has been viewed by many as a social instrument with an evident and accepted rationale. There is a conviction that some changes will come about and that it would be better if these changes could somehow be managed. The idea is that public administration in particular and bureaucracies in general should respond in some fashion in a time of social turbulence. many fear that we might confront today a failed bureaucratic system which is no longer capable of achieving more social good than harm and which no amount of tinkering is going to put right. We have always been aware of the problems such as red tape, arbitrariness, and unresponsiveness. But different scholars have proposed different ways of dealing with the perceived problems.

Before looking at specific strategies to deal with problems of bureaucracy, let us look at different concepts of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy, according to Eric Jan Lane, may be seen as a number of concepts as follows :

1. Bureaucracy as rationality,
2. Bureaucracy as leading to dysfunctions,
3. Bureaucracy as rigidity,
4. Bureaucracy as 'beamtenherrschaft,
5. Bureaucracy as chaos,
6. Bureaucracy as oversupply,
7. Bureaucracy as size maximization,
8. Bureaucracy as under control,
9. Bureaucracy as private choice.[14]

There can be no doubt today that bureaucracy is in trouble of some sort and that changes and modification in bureaucracy are necessary in order for bureaucratic organizations to achieve their goals and for the public interest to be served. A number of strategies have already been suggested in the section on types of bureaucracy. We mentioned that

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[12]Alvin W. Gouldner, qt. by Stephen P. Robbins, Ibid. p. 315.

[13]Victor Thompson, qt. by Stehen P. Robins, Op. cit. p. 316.

[14]Jan - Erik - Lane, The Public Sector : Concepts, Models and Approaches, London : SAGE, 1993, pp. 47-68.

Table 2 : Problems of Bureaucracy[15]

What It Is	Why It Once Triumphed	Why It Fails Now
Hierarchical chain of command	Brought simple large-scale order, Bosses brought order by dominating subordinates	cannot handle complexity Domination not best way to get organization intelligence
Specialization Organization by Function	Produced efficiency through division of labor Focused intelligence	Does not provide intensive cross - functional communication and continual peer-level coordination
Uniform rules	Created a sense of fairness Clearly established power of bosses	still need rules but need different rules
Standard Procedures	Provided crude organizational memory able to use unskilled workers overcame old ways	Responds slowly to change Does not deal well with complexity Does not foster interconnection
A career of advancing up the ladder	Bought loyalty Furnished continuity of elite class of managers and professionals	Fewer managers needed and more educated workforce expects promotions therefore , not enough room for advancement
Impersonal relations	Reduced force of nepotism helped leaders enforce tough discipline and make tough decisions	Information intensive jobs require in-depth relationships

[15]Ibid. p. 35.

Continued from Table 2.

What It Is	Why It Once Triumphed	Why It Fails Now
Coordination from above	Provided direction for unskilled workers Furnished strong supervision required by rapid turnover in boring job	Educated employees are ready for self-management

there were three type of bureaucracy - machine bureaucracy, political bureaucracy and humane bureaucracy. One solution suggested by James A. Medeiros and David E. Schmitt is for values integration. In other words, we should work for a multiple approach that can help provide for an internal check-and-balance value system within the bureaucracy itself. We can show this in a diagram as follows :

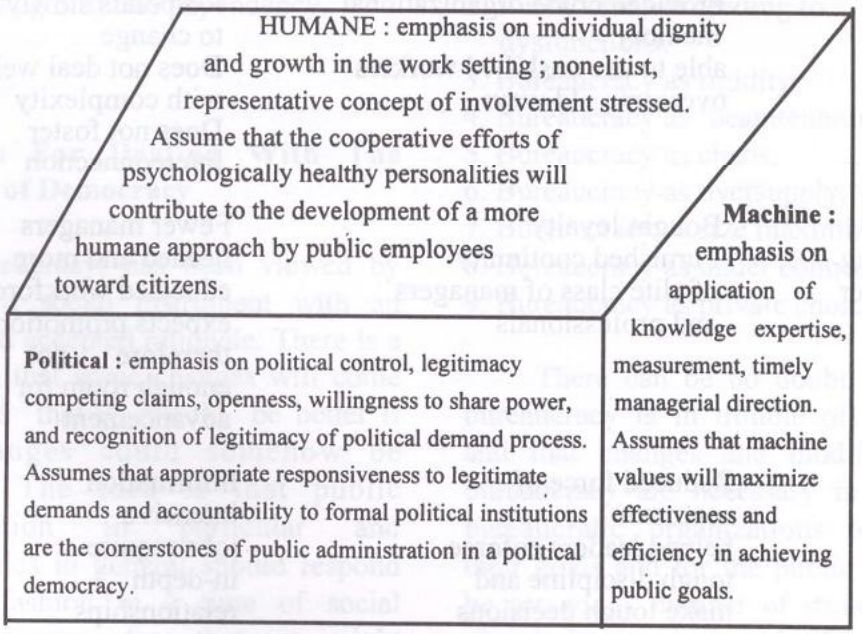

Figure 2 : Values Integration[16]

[16]James A. Mediros and David E. Schmitt, Op. cit. p. 31.

Henry Mintzberg calls for a different sort of approach. In his book, *Structure in Fives,* he describes five different organizational structures :

1. The simple structure,
2. The machine bureaucracy,
3. The professional bureaucracy,
4. The divisional structure, and
5. The adhocracy.

The machine bureaucracy and the professional bureaucracy structures deserve a closer study. Mintzberg says that the machine bureaucracy is the structure "closest to the one Max Weber first described, with standardized responsibilities, qualifications, communication channels, and work rules, as well as a clearly defined hierarchy of authority"[17]. Machine bureaucracy is typically found in the mature organization, large enough to have the volume of operating work needed for repetition and standardization, and old enough to have been able to settle on the standards it wishes to use. If the machine bureaucracy is a structure closest to Weber's ideal bureaucracy, then the professional bureaucracy structure is widely regarded as a more advanced version of it. Mintzberg explains that, " the professional bureaucracy relies for coordination on the standardization of skills and its associated design parameter, training and indoctrination. It hires duly trained and indoctrinated specialists - professionals - for the operating core, and then gives them considerable control over their own work" [18]. The standards of the professional bureaucracy originate largely outside its own structure, in the self-governing associations it operators join with their colleagues from other professional bureaucracies. The main difference between machine bureaucracy and professional bureaucracy lies in the fact that while rules and regulations in the former are externalized, in the latter, they are internalized. To many, the professional bureaucracy is an ideal form of organization since it combines standardization with decentralization.

Thus, we can see that there are three major approaches to solving the problems of bureaucracies. One may be termed the 'human approach'. Here, we can see efforts to make bureaucrats more professional and more sensitive to the needs of the public. Thus, instead of attempting to control them, efforts are made to make them control themselves through professional organizations and also by emphasizing the need for gaining the public faith and acting in the public interest. In general, we see a movement away from Weber's original concept of the impersonal administrator and a move towards a more humane and caring administrator who still abides by the rules but also uses his discretion whenever possible.

A second approach to solving the problems of bureaucracies centers on improving the structure of the bureaucracy itself. A good example of

[17]Henry Mintzberg, Structure In Fives, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey : Prentice Hall, 1993.p. 163.

[18]Ibid. p. 190..

this is the so-called professional bureaucracy model of Mintzberg. In Mintzberg's model, the organization's structure is designed in such a way that the operating core of an organization is dominated by skilled workers - professionals - who use procedures that are difficult to learn, yet are well defined. The attempt to solve the problems of bureaucracy, here, focuses on giving the professionals more power by virtue of their expertise. Faith is placed in a structure that allows the professionals to operate more or less with relative freedom and with minimal guidance from the top management. The size of the organization is often reduced to make it leaner and meaner.

The last and final approach to solving the problems of bureaucracy concentrates on the strategy employed by the organization. Here, the focus is on making organizations in general and the public sector in particular more effective and more responsive by shifting the strategy away from mere survival to being more accountable, being more aware of the public interest and in some cases even making a profit. Thus, we can see the emergence of public enterprises as an alternative form of bureaucracy.

Conclusion

It can easily be seen today that Warren Bennis was too hasty in proclaiming the death of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is certainly not dead. It is not even dying. It may be ill but it is nothing that a good doctor cannot cure. A number of different medicines have been offered to rid bureaucracy of its illnesses. Which will one work remains anybody's guess. Most likely, a combination of the various medicines on offer will probably be necessary to rescue bureaucracy from the negative image it has gained with due cause. What is significant is that today we are aware of the need for improvement and we are working hard to improve the bureaucracy and make it into a viable system that can deliver the goods to the public at large. That in itself is a success of some sort.

Like all things in life, bureaucracy will certainly change. Indeed, it appears to be heading towards a facelift of some sort. That is, it appears to be undergoing certain changes that herald better days for bureaucracy in the future. In the first place, more and more efforts are going into an attempt to make administrators more professional and more accountable to the public. Administrators are being given more freedom to act along with more responsibility. The structure of bureaucratic organizations are also changing to promote more flexibility and responsiveness. Soon, red tape and feather bedding may become symbols of the past.

What we know for certain is that bureaucracy endures. In spite of all its problems, it has survived until today. Will it be the dominating structure of organizations in the future ? Only time will tell. What we can be sure of is that whatever happens in the future, there will always be bureaucratic organizations in the world. They may be leaner and meaner than the bureaucratic

organizations we have at present. They may emphasize internal control rather than control by external rules and regulations. They may focus more on the public interest than on the narrow interest of the bureaucratic organization itself. Nevertheless, they will be bureaucracies and recognizable as bureaucracies. Sorry, Mr. Warren Bennis but bureaucracy is not dead. It has simply turned a new leaf.

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