

Bureaucracy and the Bureaucratic Mind

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Bureaucracy is a system of management invented to handle state affairs and organize state relationships with its citizens. Further developments of the system have enabled it to provide much help to business concerns, most organizations and many institutions in managing their internal and external affairs. Standardization of procedures, keeping records of transactions, and organizing decision-making processes have, consequently become a part of every management system. Though the West is often credited with the development of the bureaucratic system, the Chinese claim that they knew and used this system thousands of years ago. In fact, China has today the best and most detailed records of state affairs of all ancient nations.

Bureaucracy as a system of management has many advantages and disadvantages. The advantages include facilitating the management of people and situations and, in most cases, predicting the outcomes of actions, which in turn reduces the chances for unpleasant surprises. The system disadvantages are also many; they include undermining the ability of employees to take initiative and be creative. In a bureaucratic system, subordinates normally perceive the taking of initiatives as risky; superiors see such acts as a challenge to their authority.

Despite the many disadvantages of bureaucracy we believe that the degree of control it gives superiors over subordinates to be the more serious and possibly the most damaging outcome. Bureaucracy, while giving bosses or superiors almost total control over subordinates, demands that such subordinates follow given instructions without questioning. Control and subordination, in turn, become the core of the bureaucratic system, the organizing principle that guides decisions and determines outcomes. Every employee is supposed to follow the instructions of his or her boss; every boss is given the authority to guide and control his subordinates.

Bureaucratic practices have led to creating a mind that generally lacks curiosity and can only function within certain limits and according to prescribed rules and regulations. The bureaucratic mind, being in control, uses his authority to limit the ability of the system to reform itself. No one within such a system has enough authority to initiate change, and no one has enough courage to propose change and disrupt the peace.

Bureaucracy in the West is still strong; it continues to develop slowly and be subject to criticism and calls for reform. In the Third World, however, bureaucracy is an alien system of management; it did not emanate from local traditions or come in response to real national needs. It was often imposed by a colonial power or borrowed from a former colonial power to meet the needs of a government trying to model itself after a foreign state system and give an elite the means to rule without much challenge. In fact, I believe that the institutionalization of the bureaucratic system in the Third World has given the state enough control to substantially reduce the possibility of “revolutions” occurring as frequently as they did decades ago. Since bureaucracy was not an indigenous system, it did not benefit Third World nations as much they expected and hoped for. And because it was imposed or borrowed from the outside, indigenous forces to reform it and voices critical of it continue to be weak and ineffective.

While the shortcomings of bureaucracy are evident everywhere, they are nowhere as evident and harmful as they are in educational institutions and business concerns. Putting the bureaucratic mind in control hinders the ability of universities, research institutions, companies and organizations to be creative and innovative. Control tends to convince superiors that it is their responsibility to know all details, allow no surprises, delegate no authority, and have all situations under control. And since no boss can obtain the knowledge he or she needs to control every thing and guide everyone and influence every situation, the dominance of the bureaucratic mind has become a threat, undermining critical thinking, free speech, creativity, and institutional transformation. The enlightened bureaucrat that certain people try to promote is nothing but a fiction. His existence is as real and good as that of the benevolent

dictator that many Arab intellectuals promoted in the 1960s to imprison them and confiscate their rights.

Subordination requires that employees follow the instructions of superiors without much thinking. Subordinates are not supposed to think; only superiors are supposed to do so. But since every superior, with the exception of the very few on the top, is also a subordinate, very few in a bureaucracy are in a position to think, take initiative, and be creative. New ideas are rarely encouraged and seldom appreciated; and violators are often considered trouble-makers deserving punishment. All employees, with the exception of the top management, become mercenaries whose primary objective is to preserve their jobs, and whose primary job is to observe regulations and accept and follow instructions. When control and subordination become the organizing principles of an institution, they undermine the institution's ability to respond positively to the growing needs of its clients and to adapt in a time to the changing circumstances of its environment.

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