

BUREAUCRACY: WEBER'S IDEAL TYPE

The term “bureaucracy” has never been so precisely defined than in the writings of Max Weber. Such precision results in a useful and enduring conceptualization of the term. This paper examines four essential characteristics of Weber’s ideal type bureaucracy; defining them and their technical advantages in the context of certain overarching sociological trends. These trends are impersonality, efficiency, and rationality. The essential characteristics of Weber’s bureaucracy are: hierarchy of authority, salaried careers, specialization and technical qualification, and written rules.

Hierarchy of Authority

Hierarchy. Hierarchy involves a pyramid-like structure with a single person making decisions for those under their jurisdiction. A formalized hierarchy has long been evident in religion, warfare, and polity. God is the ultimate authority, and those who represent god rank much higher than the common person. Armies rely heavily on a clearly developed (and disciplined) hierarchy to execute orders. Polity also has explicitly ranked officials from monarchs to vassals. However, since many of these organizations could not be classified as bureaucracy, the type and scope of authority within a hierarchy must be further specified.

Authority. Weber develops a typology of authority where rational legal authority is contrasted with previous forms. An organization would be classified as a bureaucracy only when the basis of authority is *rational*, that is, explicitly designed to facilitate some organizational goal. Further, the goals of the organization are pursued as *values*, rather than just a means to an end. This is in contrast to traditional authority, where the leader personally legitimates orders based on time honored ways of doing. Although stable and long term like rational authority, traditional

authority lacks an explicitly rational design and involves a personal orientation to the leader rather than duty to the organization. Charismatic authority finds little room in bureaucracy since it involves change and instability, although aspects of the routinization of charisma may provide hints about how bureaucracy develops. To classify as bureaucracy, an organization must have a rationally determined and stable hierarchy of authority, with a duty orientation to the organization.

Jurisdiction. Jurisdiction refers to a limited scope of responsibility—in other words, authority is explicitly limited for use within the organization. This entails limiting authority to a specific office or division as well as limiting the range of activities subordinates are expected to perform. An example of the first would be an army general trying to order a civil servant around and an example of the second would be a professor asking a student to wash their car. Today, these examples are amusing since they are absurdly outside a superior's jurisdiction, but this has not always been the case. Under more personal authority, subordinates were expected to perform a relatively unlimited range of activities for their superiors. Because this was frequently associated with opportunistic and self-serving behavior at the expense of the organization, one of the key characteristics of bureaucracy is that the authority relationship is explicitly limited to the pursuit of organizational goals.

Limitations. This raises the issue of “Whose goals?” and there is some confusion on this point. Bureaucratic administration is superior at *attaining* goals, but it requires leaders (in the most idealistic sense) to set them. Weber makes clear that leaders must be ideologically inclined—that is, they must create policy and set goals from their vision of where they want the organization to go. But what even Weber misses (forgivable since bureaucracies were small in his day) is that this occurs at every level of a large bureaucracy—leaders at each level of the hierarchy are ideologically setting goals which effect and may be at cross purposes with their lateral

counterparts. This can result in politics, jurisdictional battles, and goal incongruity, the very things that a rationally developed hierarchy of authority with limited jurisdiction was intended to avoid. “One boss” with the “final word” is easier said than achieved in large, complex, and interdependent bureaucracies. Concerns over accountability (Who is responsible?) arise if we assume that cross-cutting interdependencies are common.

Summary. Hierarchy of authority meets the functional need for leadership in any organization. A rationally developed and limited *jurisdictional* authority, however, is essential to achieving a bureaucratic organization. This results in a rational specification of duties—the superior protects the rules, rights, and order, judges disputes, and develops polity, while the subordinates obey the authority vested within the leader by virtue of these same rules. In addition, a clearly specified source of control and decision making facilitates supervision, competency, and accountability. Although in large, complex, and interdependent bureaucracies these are not simple matters, this is the ideal type that Weber suggests we pursue.

Salaried Careers

Salary and Long Term Orientation. In contrast to “payment in kind,” which creates an obligation toward the superior instead of the organization, a monetary salary facilitates an impersonal orientation. It is also essential that subordinates align their interests with those of the organization. A career facilitates this by giving subordinates a long term interest in succeeding *with* the organization. A secure, full-time career fosters commitment and provides a bank of experience. This is in contrast to a spoils system, where a new administration replaces administrative positions with their own supporters. In such circumstances, experience is

periodically reduced near zero, and administrators focus on political issues and personal ties with powerful leaders rather than pursuing their duty to the office.

Duty to Office. Providing bureaucratic administrators with a salaried career promotes value-rational duty to office in a number of ways. One method is by appointment instead of election. Elected officials owe allegiance to the party boss or the group that elected them rather than the organization. If appointed by an immediate superior, the official is directly accountable in their pursuit of organizational goals. An associated technique is giving tenure after demonstrating a proper duty orientation for some set period. Tenure makes it safe to do the right thing despite transient political pressures.¹

Orderly Promotion. Long term orientation and duty to office are facilitated by a rational and orderly system of appointment and promotion. This is guided by rules (covered below) explicitly detailing the qualifications and credentials for each job. Implicit is a system of merit, where positions are filled with the most qualified people. Qualification is determined by scores on examinations, educational credentials, or experience and success in related positions, but *not* personal ties. This results in a system where the best do rise to the top, and administrators are rewarded for duty to the organization.

Limitations. The argument that duty to the office results from these advances may not be as strong as Weber believes. In my opinion, he favors an optimistic view of administrative human behavior. We are certainly familiar with bureaucrats (in the worst sense of the term) who, through their superior knowledge of the rules, operate just inside them. The flip side to a secure salary is that it becomes difficult to take it away from a “bad” worker. Weber mentions the problems of

feathering one's nest and usurping power away from the leader. A final limitation is the difficulty promoting on merit alone. Again, experience tells us that other considerations (such as personal networks) come into play along with merit.

Summary. All three issues covered here facilitate impersonality and a value orientation with the organization. Salaries and security both reduce the opportunity for personal ties to develop and foster long term loyalty. Appointment and tenure help develop a professional attitude and a duty to the office instead of supporters or political pressure. A merit based appointment and promotion system brings in the best people and rewards a history of organizational support and success. Although some practical difficulties remain to be worked out, the efficiency that results from such a system is clearly superior to one where rewards and promotions are based on personal ties.

Specialization and Technical Qualification

Division of Labor. One of the principle advantages of a bureaucracy is its ability to divide large projects into manageable parts. A direct consequence is increased specialization—it becomes impossible for one person to know everything involved. Weber lists this as one of bureaucracy's great strengths: its unparalleled expertise in specific areas. Similar to authority, technical expertise is rationally divided into very small areas of responsibility. Technical skills, however, are increasingly learned in an accredited school instead of through on the job apprenticeship. These specific technical skills allow for large gains in productivity.² However, since non-bureaucratic organizations also rely on specialization to increase efficiency, further

¹ The theoretical inconsistency between appointed dependence on the superior and the independence of tenure is never addressed by Weber, who states that both facilitate a duty orientation.

specification is required. Bureaucracy entails a rationally devised division of labor only when supported by formalized technical requirements.

Formalized Technical Requirements. China had the earliest form of bureaucracy, and one of its strongest features there was a system of examinations for office. This not only facilitated merit-based selection and promotion, but the high *educational* requirements for office resulted in a free inflow of new ideas and a high rate of innovation. A requirement for educational credentials has additional advantages: the calculability during selection afforded by standardized credentials; the freedom of selection and mobility afforded someone with such credentials; and a greater commitment to the specialty evidenced by the attainment of a degree. The *spirit of expertness*, if supported by the organization, is a great asset. A rationally determined division of labor, detailed technical qualification, and a value placed on expertise is essential to the efficiency of a bureaucratic organization.

Limitations. Unlike the previous characteristics, where achieving the bureaucratic criteria is problematic, here it has some unanticipated consequences that Weber himself describes. Since the best schools are expensive, educational criteria tends to plutocracy. This results in a system little different from when the elites transferred positions through heredity. A more pressing issue is the ability of highly specialized technicians to gain power by virtue of their knowledge. A supervisor becomes increasingly dependent upon a specialized bureaucracy to interpret and deal with issues he is more and more unable to understand. If the bureaucracy's technicians are prone to opportunism they can hide gross mistakes as "secret" or hold superiors hostage to now critical information.

² The classic example of this appears to be Adam Smith's pin factory example where a division of labor resulted in

Summary. Bureaucracy owes much of its technical superiority to specialization and formalized technical training. These characteristics have an immediate impact on efficiency, and help to foster an organizational culture centering on expertise. Certainly many great advances are attributable to people working diligently on increasingly minute aspects of their field. And while such experts are potentially able to expropriate large amounts of power, the gains more than make up for this. Unlike many “efficiency experts,” Weber correctly emphasizes the organizational characteristics that limit authority, foster a sense of duty to office, and make people internalize the rules—these things limit such personalistic behavior and align interests with those of the organization.

Written Rules

Rational Law. The notion of an all encompassing, universalistic, and coherent law stems from early religious attempts to codify an increasingly complex set of proscriptions.³ Along with the transition from specific prohibitions comes a more abstract and relativistic sense of right and wrong. Interpreting the particulars always involves an “expert,” but increased education and literacy lead to the extension of laws to leaders. Thus, a system of rational law is seen as a set of rules *all* must obey but under which all benefit. On a smaller scale, bureaucratic rules involve such a rationally developed set of guidelines delineating the ground rules and preferred means to attain organizational goals.

The Proliferation of Written Rules. Each of the characteristics of bureaucracy covered above requires rules. Rules specify jurisdiction, limit the range of authority, and define impropriety. Rules detail job classification, technical qualifications, appointment, and

magnitudes of difference over what individual workers could produce.

advancement. When rationally planned, they provide an unsurpassed level of consistency. Written rules act as the virtual memory of an organization, codifying its best heuristics for all to follow. Often, rules come to be viewed as implicitly good and may even become reified. Like technical expertise, rules have some unanticipated consequences. Weber defines red tape as when rules get in the way of immediate goals. Many times the rationale for the rule is no longer valid, yet the rule persists.

Summary. Prolific rules may be the most easily identifiable characteristic of what we popularly define as bureaucracy. However, what Weber had in mind was the willing subordination to an abstract set of organizational goals. Rule-bound conduct is essential to bureaucracy—the imperative is that everyone must follow the rules for everyone to benefit. Rules and their enforcement serve both to limit free-riding and to internalize organizational imperatives, whatever they might be. While at times, rules can proliferate to an organization’s detriment, officials are certainly able to determine which rules are important and thereby cut through the red tape if they are so motivated.

Conclusion

Weber’s ideal type bureaucracy remains an advanced synthesis of a number of organizational characteristics with far reaching structural consequences. He considers historical developments and essential precursors,⁴ and details the immediate and not so obvious advantages of the essential characteristics. Weber uses three general trends (impersonality, efficiency,

³ Compare Leviticus with the Ten Commandments, or the increasingly abstract ideas attributed to Jesus.

⁴ Limits to authority develop out of greater personal rights of a democratic society, long term salaries require a the stable money economy brought about by taxation and calculable laws regarding property, technical training entails codifying and transmitting previous advances through mass education, and rules require literacy and an internalized and abstract conceptualization of right and wrong.

rationality) to provide a sense of where organizations are going. Limited and explicit authority promotes an efficient use of power and minimizes personal and political pursuits. A salaried career promotes office efficiency through an impersonal duty to the organization, facilitated by appointment and merit based advancement. Specialization and technical qualification primarily assist in efficiency, but the creation of a “culture of expertise” deserves future consideration. Rules contribute to all three trends; impersonality through the substitution of universalistic rather than personalistic norms, efficiency through standardizing the best means to pursue goals, and rationality since rules represent an objective, logical way of dealing with a complex world.

These characteristics overlap to support one another in subtle ways. Jurisdictional authority specifies responsibilities in a complex division of labor. Organizational identification and a sense of duty to office minimize the abuse of expert knowledge. The process of credentialization paves the way for the internalization of an official calling. Finally, socialization to follow abstract rules makes one more “plastic.” Change the rules, and the people will follow the new rules. Impersonality, efficiency, and rationality lead us to accept the legitimacy of rules to an increasing degree. For me, this is what Weber meant by the Iron Cage of Bureaucracy—we increasingly accept the suspension of our personal values for those of the organization.