

Coercive and Enabling Bureaucracies: A Selective Summary of the Main Differences

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"It's the bureaucracy." No doubt this phrase is familiar to many colleagues in the human services. For example, bureaucratic organization is the reason for sub-optimal performance. It's the reason why helping professionals cannot practice in accordance with their training and professional standards. It's implicated by helping professionals as the cause of mind-numbing routines and meaningless paperwork. It accounts for clients' alienation as they stand in lines, endure long waits, and experience impersonal, "client processing" procedures. It also is invoked by human services professionals when they lament the lack of time as well as the resources needed for every client. Bureaucracy is the reason for avoiding favoritism, and it means standardization in the name of equitable, fair treatment.¹

In this line of thinking, bureaucracy is the primary cause of countless problems. Many of these problems cannot be solved because the bureaucracy cannot be changed. Just as the sun rises daily in the East and sets in the West, bureaucracy's constraints and problems are predictable, inevitable, and impervious to change.

For human services workers, the implicit message may be something like this: "If you want to do this kind of work, you'll need to adjust to the bureaucratic system. *You* must change--you must adapt to the way things are done here. *It* won't change, and you can't change it. So, if you're not satisfied with the way things are done here, you may wish to look for another job and another line of work." Obviously, messages like this encourage workers to leave.

Moreover, these messages may convey four related impressions. First: Nothing can be done to improve the organization and its operations. In other words, "look around you because this is as good as it gets." Second: The primary responsibility of supervisors, managers, and commissioners is to enforce rules and seek compliance with the system (even when they may not agree with them). Third: The pathway to promotion in the bureaucratic hierarchy is to follow the rules and conform to the system. In other words, once you're promoted, you're obliged to defend the system. And fourth, front-line workers who seek and promote changes in the organization are destined to experience conflict with their supervisors, managers and commissioners. Thus, for front-liners, "it's them versus us," and adversarial perceptions and conflict-ridden relationships abound.

¹ The classic reference is Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Such is the context for a fresh line of interdisciplinary research and development. Individuals and teams of researchers and practitioners are examining bureaucracy anew. Here are a few examples of the kinds of questions they are addressing. Is employee well being one of the inevitable and unavoidable costs for the efficiency bureaucracy provides?² Are supervisors, managers, and commissioners in effect "sentenced" to policing rules and regulations, which they inherited from their predecessors? Are people in need ("clients") destined to receive rule-driven, rationed, and impersonal services? Is it possible to change large scale, public sector bureaucracies and the working conditions they provide? What changes improve system performance and accountability? Which changes reduce undesirable, preventable worker turnover?

Several lines of research and development can be traced back to these questions. As requested, I'll sketch one line below.

Two Kinds of Bureaucracy

The main assumption in this line of work is that it's not bureaucracy per se that is the main problem; the main problem is the kind of bureaucracy that's developed and maintained. According to this line of thinking, a bureaucracy can be either coercive or enabling.³ Because coercive bureaucracy breeds the several problems noted above, it is the problem. An enabling bureaucracy comprises the main solution. This latter kind fosters creative, informal relations among workers at all levels.⁴

The implication is that commissioners, managers, supervisors, and caseworkers are able to exert influence and control over the extent to which their agency is a coercive bureaucracy or an enabling one. The more that the agency bureaucracy is enabling, the greater the benefits to workers and clients. Salient details follow.

Bureaucracy's Defining Features

In the classic view, bureaucracy is the ideal form of organization for coordinating, supervising, and managing the work of specialists. In a bureaucracy, work roles, functions, and flows are specified, and responsibilities are fixed.

In other words, work is formalized. Procedures are standardized and specified, and functional differentiation follows. Differences among front-line workers are accompanied by differences among supervisors, managers, and other officials in the

² Alvin Gouldner, a sociologist, is credited with raising this question and launching a critical approach to the study of bureaucratic organizations. Gouldner, A. (1955). Metaphysical pathos and the theory of bureaucracy. *American Political Science Review*, 49, 496-507.

³ Adler, P, & Borys, B. (1996). Two types of bureaucracy: Enabling and coercive. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 41, 61-89.

⁴ Morand, D. (1995). The role of behavioral formality and informality in the enactment of bureaucratic versus organic organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 20, 831-872.

administrative hierarchy. In the classic view, bureaucratic organizations are hierarchical, and a triangular shape mirrors differential power, authority, and expertise.

Bureaucracy also offers a system of norms, and it encourages a way of thinking and acting--a so-called "cognitive style." These norms may become behavioral rules. Key examples of these norms are provided in Figure 1 (attached at the end of this brief).⁵

Here is a key point: *There is nothing inherently bad or wrong with some, or even most, of these norms and rules.* (Anonymity and mechanistic relations are obvious exceptions in caring-oriented, human services work.) The main issue is how they are interpreted, implemented, evaluated, and improved.

In fact, there is an accompanying rationale that recommends them. This rationale emphasizes merit; it includes fair, just, and equitable treatment of everyone, including every employee and every client. This rationale and the accompanying norms and rules were developed in response to forms of organization and practice that permitted favoritism, nepotism, greed, injustice, and "lining one's pockets" at the public's expense.

Introducing Coercive Bureaucracy

To reiterate, in this line of thinking, the difference between a coercive bureaucracy and an enabling one lies in how these norms and rules are interpreted, implemented, and evaluated. It matters whether they are flexible and amenable to adaptation. It also matters when caring relations are not permitted.

In a coercive bureaucracy, norms and rules are not flexible or amenable to adaptation. The adjective "mechanistic" is applied to such a bureaucracy because the entire organization runs, more or less, on automatic pilot. Few, if any, people claim to be at the controls. All emphasize faithful implementation and proper procedures, often claiming "I'm just doing my job." Everyone is expected to conform to the norms and follow the rules.

Only the people at the top of the bureaucratic hierarchy (the top of the triangle) are able to see "the big picture" regarding the work needing to be performed and its relation to societal expectations and needs. Arguably, the central task for the leadership hierarchy (commissioners, managers, and supervisors) is to gain compliance from workers through the strategic use of surveillance and sanctions, especially punishment.

In a coercive bureaucracy, workers are viewed as entities to be motivated, supervised, managed, and controlled. Their superiors assume that workers show up and perform their designated tasks to secure their salaries and benefits. Salaries and benefits are the only incentive to work effectively.

⁵ Berger, P., Berger, B., & Kellner, H. (1973). *The homeless mind: Modernization and consciousness*. New York: Random House.

Furthermore, in a coercive bureaucracy workers have little expertise to offer to their superiors. They cannot be trusted to make good, solid decisions, and they require close supervision. Expectations and standards associated with professionalism, especially discretion and some autonomy in decision-making, are among the casualties in coercive bureaucracies. Workers experience supervision and management routines as "looking over my shoulder" and "constantly second guessing me." In response, workers may develop their own coping strategies. Some may do "undercover work" (where they do things without informing supervisors) and "CYA work" (where workers hide and cover problems and mistakes).

When these coping strategies are detected, and it becomes clear to the leadership hierarchy that workers are not following the rules, the supervisory and managerial grip tightens. In this fashion, coercive bureaucracies become even more so. The agency's climate deteriorates as the quality of treatment and interaction worsens. In the worst case scenario, there is with little relief in sight because the attendant processes and dynamics are self-reinforcing and self-sealing. No one, least of all front-line workers, are able to effect meaningful and effective improvements. This is why a coercive bureaucracy is called "mechanistic;" it appears to run on automatic pilot.

Enabling Bureaucracy

The leadership hierarchy in an enabling bureaucracy operates with the different assumptions about the workforce and the priorities of commissioners, managers, and supervisors. In this kind of bureaucracy, the workforce is an asset or a resource to be maximized. In contrast to the assumptions held by leaders in a coercive bureaucracy, leaders in an enabling bureaucracy operate with a different knowledge base about their workforce. They support and promote norms and standards of professionalism.⁶

For example, leaders know that workers enjoy voluntary commitments to their jobs. They know that workers' identities are intertwined with their jobs (i.e., who workers are and what they do often are intertwined). Leaders know that workers have reasons other than pay and benefits for doing their jobs, including the fit between their personal lives and their jobs. For this reason, leaders know that these workers want and need their work to be enjoyable and meaningful. Leaders also know that, with training and supports, workers can be trusted to make good, solid decisions. They view competent, supportive supervision as a support system for workers. In other words, the supervision and management system dovetails with training, and both are designed enables the development of expertise and mastery. Furthermore, leaders solicit workers' input on decisions, rules, norms, and practices because they know that working conditions (including the agency's culture and its present climate) exert a powerful influence on workers efficacy, effectiveness, and their decisions to stay or leave.

Formalizing, Specifying, and Standardizing Work and Jobs

⁶ Caseworkers and supervisors representing diverse backgrounds (i.e., not just social workers) who participated in our research consistently emphasized professionalism and professional standards.

Enabling bureaucracies, like all bureaucracies, formalize work. Work formalization is an indispensable organizational technology. It prevents the inefficiencies and ineffectiveness indicators of trial and error routines and learning systems. In other words, reasonable, justifiable rules, norms, routines, and behavioral prescriptions are valuable when they contribute to the achievement of desirable outcomes and benefits.

In short, it's not a bad development when organizational routines and rules develop, and when *one* way of doing things becomes *the* way. To the contrary, these developments are indicative of an organizational technology. *Technology* is vital to agencies. It is the organization and formalization of knowledge and the organization and mobilization of people to achieve practical purposes. Enabling bureaucracies develop technologies for achieving practical purposes and for learning and improving as they do.

Enabling Bureaucracy's Key Features

Drawing on the aforementioned assumptions that leaders have about workers, enabling bureaucracies exhibit and promote the following key features.⁷

- *Global transparency.* Everyone in the organization is privy to "the big picture." It's not restricted to the leaders at the top of the organizational triangle. Furthermore, information is public, readily available, and testable. In contrast to coercive bureaucracy--wherein some things are not discussed and the fact that they can't be discussed is not discussed--everything can be discussed, and errors are viewed as opportunities for learning, improvement, and capacity-building.
- *Interdependent relationships are emphasized and rewarded.* Everyone knows how the specialized parts of the organization--jobs, functions, rules, and norms--fit together. Everyone knows how they contribute to the agency's missions and functions.
- *Clarity and unity of purpose.* Thanks to an agreed upon mission (e.g., protecting children by supporting families and strengthening communities), everyone is "on the same page." Everyone knows how paperwork, rules and regulations, and other kinds of requirements are related to the achievement of this mission.
- *A coherent, effective system for recruitment, training, and organizational initiation-induction.* This system is inseparable from the working conditions provided. The initiation-induction component is vital. It is a determinant of the transfer and maintenance of training, and it is a driver for the organization's culture and climate.
- *Voice, involvement, and genuine say so.* All organizational members are viewed as "experts" with a valuable perspective to contribute. The search for better ways is a constant in listening and problem-solving circles.

⁷ While the main reference is Adler and Borys (1996), countless other researchers offer identical, comparable, and compatible recommendations.

- *Some employment security.* Honest, frank, and open communications are vital to enabling bureaucracies. Staff at all levels, especially new, front-line staff, must perceive that their views are welcomed; and that they are able to offer them without risking their jobs and careers.
- *Minimize asymmetries of power and authority.* In other words, do your best to flatten the bureaucracy, making it less of a triangle. Equity and equitable relations are important here, and so are impartiality, fairness, and justice. Power and authority differences do not vanish; they take a back seat to processes and dynamics that signal "we're all in the same boat here."
- *Clear norms and rules, both formal and informal.* These norms and rules operate in formal and informal relations and operations. Everyone agrees to steward and help enforce them. They are associated with positive interactions and a high quality of treatment among workers and among workers and clients.
- *Procedures and criteria for balancing workers' discretion, autonomy, and authority with organizational-bureaucratic accountability.* According to Lipsky (1980): "Managing discretion is the heart of the problem of street-level bureaucracy." (p. 196). Furthermore: "The key is to find a correct balance between compassion and flexibility, on the one hand, and the rigid, fair application of rules and procedures, on the other. (pp. 15-16). Where bureaucratic accountability is concerned, Lipsky provides these specific priorities:
 1. Agencies must know what they want workers to do.
 2. Where multiple priorities exist, agencies must be able to place them in rank order
 3. Agencies must know how to measure workers' performance
 4. Agencies must be able to compare workers to one another to establish a standard for judgment
 5. They must build shared responsibility and mutual accountability among workers; and between workers and clients.
 6. They must encourage clients and workers to become more effective advocates for change.
 7. They must find ways to reduce worker isolation, harassment, and resource inadequacy. (p. 205).

Other features may be added to this list. It's intended as a starter list, one designed to facilitate additional discussion and planning.

Key Tensions that Won't Vanish

This selective contrast between coercive and enabling bureaucracy is subject to misinterpretation. It's not one versus the other. Although something can be done—fast and effectively--it is not a simple matter of initiating a process whereby it's "out with the old" (coercive) and "in with the new" (enabling).

As everyone knows, several tensions, contradictions, and dilemmas are present. At least for the foreseeable future, they will not disappear, and they'll weigh on workers at all levels in agencies. Examples include:

1. Federal and, in turn, state policy requirements, which influence and determine the contexts and requirements for work.
2. Contradictory expectations associated with coercive bureaucracy, professionalism, privatization pressures and market forces (e.g., pressure to contract and “out-source”), and civil society networks (predicated on everyday citizens assuming joint responsibility for protecting children, supporting families, and strengthening neighborhood communities).
3. The tensions and challenges posed by an incomplete body of knowledge and insufficient research
4. The challenges and tensions of accessing knowledge, resources, and expertise outside the realm of bureaucracy's reach. Issues include the boundaries for practice in relation to the co-occurring needs of families and the agency's relations with other systems (e.g., mental health, the courts, schools).
5. Conflicting views of the agency and the work, starting with County Boards of Supervisors.
6. Competing financial demands brought to bear on Commissioners and the agency, including Medicaid costs and operating costs amid proposals for tax reduction.

With these and other tensions in mind, here is the final key feature of an enabling bureaucracy.

- *Due recognition of dilemmas, uncertainties, environmental complexity.* They need to be freely and openly acknowledged and use constant adjustive development and learning. There's a balance involved here between efficient and routine operations in relation to needs and problems that are fixed, predictable, known and given; and adjustments made for "wicked problems" that perplex everyone. Enabling bureaucracies that can reach this balance are known, in some circles, as "ambidextrous organizations." This challenge also is an opportunity for developments that reduce undesirable, preventable turnover and improve efficiency and effectiveness.

Epilogue

Reactions and suggestions are welcome. And, as the saying goes, "there's more where this came from." Respond and ask, and we'll do our best to comply. Best wishes and keep up the good work.

Figure 1. Examples of Bureaucratic Norms

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| a. <i>specialization</i> | each unit has its own sphere of expertise on which it is founded and against which performance can be assessed. |
| b. <i>referral</i> | since each unit is specialized, if the problem does not fit the unit, the problem and the person are shuttled off. |
| c. <i>coverage</i> | nothing within the sphere of the organization is left out--if something is, it is added |
| d. <i>proper procedure</i> | the essence of bureaucracy is application of rational principles to action--systematize, formalize conduct. Efficiency of means is accompanied by quality control and assurance procedures (including "canned" service packages). |
| e. <i>redress</i> | adjudication of improper procedure--this is source of change in procedure as well |
| f. <i>anonymity</i> | personal-social diagnoses provide impersonal, objective data that serve as the basis for impartial, fair treatment and interactions. |
| g. <i>hierarchy</i> | authority and expertise are associated with one's position in the agency, and most are vested in a few who see the whole picture as opposed to the many who see only its parts |
| h. <i>orderliness</i> | the propensity for taxonomies--i.e. tendency to classify into components and categories, which are self-serving. |
| i. <i>organizability</i> | everything in principle is organizable and classifiable; when problems surface, they require "administration." |
| j. <i>mechanistic</i> | complete, comprehensive rules and regulations can be quickly, automatically, and uniformly implemented by workers |
| k. <i>reproducible</i> | no action is assumed to be so unique that it cannot be done by someone else with comparable training. Comparable training prepares people to replicate interventions. |
| l. <i>production line</i> | each person should act on specialized parts of the product while remaining mindful that the organization's process will deal with the whole |

- m. *componentiality* separation of work from private life; segregation of human needs.
- n. *anonymity* equality of treatment requires affective neutrality (keep your distance, manage your emotions).