

The Philosophy of Administration In Academia

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To discuss administration effectively in a comparatively brief discourse is like trying to explain sin in a few words. Not that sin and administration are synonymous (or are they?), but both are fraught with diversity of human concept and opinion, and defy objective definition.

How many of us have ever bothered to consult a dictionary definition of administration and administrator? Quite safely, I'll wager that less than one tenth of one per cent of those who use the terms daily have ever sought for a dictionary definition of them.

Administration, like happiness, love, beauty, and agriculture, "means different things to different people." And, indeed, even if it were universally agreed upon to accept a dictionary definition of administration, it still would mean different things to different people. This is because administration is a function of the administrator and the administrated, and the value of this function is expressible only as modified by certain variables.

Chief among these variables are (1) the established policies, goals and objectives of the concerned unit administered, (2) its relationship to peer units and to overall organization composed of these units, and (3) the traditional rapport between administrator and administrated.

Thus it is, that administration in business and industry, although ostensibly serving the same needs and purpose as in Academia, functionally is quite different. I dare say, the philosophy of administration in the hardnosed business world, if suddenly applied to academic institutions, would result in mutiny and revolt by professors and students alike, perhaps wrecking these institutions. Conversely, it seems equally safe to declare that the application of Academia's philosophy (or practice) of administration, with its strong overtones of permissive psychology ("academic freedom"), to business and industry organizations who must operate for immediate monetary profit, would conceivably mean financial ruin for them. These contrasting philosophies of administration offer excellent possibilities for additional conjecture, but I shall confine myself to the philosophy of administration in Academia.

In academic circles it appears to me that administrators are **expected** by their subordinates to be omnipotent and omniscient, but generally **thought** to be weak and stupid. They are **expected** to have limitless funds at their disposal, but **suspected** of doling these out for purposes, projects and people to suit their whim or fancy. These are exaggerations, of course, but are not falsifications. For every administrator, there is a percentage of his subordinates who are would-be administrators. They think they could do everything he is doing, and do it better. And maybe they could.

In Academia, administrators are persons who have been highly trained in some discipline, who have given excellent performance in that discipline (usually in research and publication), and who have been "rewarded" with promotion to administrative positions. Rarely have they had any training¹ in administrative techniques and philosophies. Whether this is good or bad is a matter of opinion, but the fact remains that in most cases academic administrators initially are academicians much more than they are administrators. They receive "on the job" training in administration, most of which is by trial and error.

In Academia, the administrator does not overtly seek the job. This just isn't done, or if it is done the applicant is immediately under suspicion, as pointed out by Wolfe.¹ Rather, the job seeks the man, and this circumstance throws an entirely different psychological aura around the whole procedure, at least in the sense of who is wooing whom.

¹Recently (Science, December 10, 1965, p. 1411) Dael Wolfe called attention to the American Council of Education's 5-year program, under a grant from The Ford Foundation, of "providing internships in academic administration to selected faculty members who would like to sample the administrative life." Wolfe predicts that some of these internships "will be filled by persons who defy the academic mores by frankly aspiring to administrative careers. . . ."

Influencing criteria in the selection of administrators are likely to revolve around professional stature and reputation, and the status quotient these are expected to provide, especially in the selection of department chairmen or heads. These same criteria usually apply also to higher administrative offices, but to a progressively lesser extent, being replaced somewhat by demonstrated administrative ability.

I believe it was Thomas Jefferson who made the statement, "That government governs best which governs least." This might be paraphrased to read, "That administrator governs best who governs least." This is probably a fairly acceptable generality, but cannot be taken literally or applied universally simply because some types of persons, competent otherwise, function best when governed most.

In academic circles a protective credo has evolved through the years called "academic freedom." I would not argue against the original precepts of academic freedom, wherein colleges and universities were construed not to be factories; the faculty were devoted and dedicated servants who did not need a time clock, "working hours," or any significant degree of supervision to assure that they gave "a day's work for a day's pay." Academic freedom, however, has been assumed by some to be an absolute *laissez faire*, enabling them to do and say as they please, to conduct teaching and research functions with autonomy, and phooey on administrators (after receiving tenure, that is). While many individuals today can be entrusted to be "governed least," others can not. It has seemed to me that those who can not have been on the increase in recent years, perhaps because Academia has attained a reputation of tolerating judgemental mediocrity, under the guise of individualistic free thinking.

In this connection I can say, quite proudly, that somehow the agricultural colleges have attracted only a very small percentage of such individuals. So, in general, I believe it to be true that a minimum of governing is required among agricultural faculties.

If this be so, then what is the function of administration in the agricultural segment of Academia? To what extent do we need administrators?² I believe we do need administrators and I believe their function to be the same as in other segments, but not be as intensively applied.

First of all, administration should provide leadership, and this leadership should be the product of the wisdom and perspective of age and maturity, and a good residue of the vigor and enthusiasm of youth. Most college and university teachers will not be pushed, but will respond to adept leadership. They are individualistic, some seemingly by conscious self direction to be so, and not constituted to accept administrative fiat on faith.

Oh, an administrator may think he has "laid down the law," but the chances are that if the majority of his faculty is not in sympathy with the edict, they can defeat it by the simple and frustrating (to the administrator) expedient of passive resistance. So, democratic procedures are indicated and through the years have come to be the general practice. Most faculty people seem to like to feel they have had a hand in formulating policies within their departments and colleges, and frequently render valuable assistance in this capacity.

This has lead to a widespread tendency toward "ABC" administration in Academia (agriculture, no less), i. e., administration by committee. Committees have proliferated and multiplied, on campus and off. Some professors report active membership on 14 or even more committees! What a shameful dilution of professional time and effort!

How much opportunity for true leadership by an administrator does this multiple involvement of his faculty allow? If he does decide, without benefit of committee, on a certain policy or procedure, he is censured as autocratic, a despot. If he submits to administration by committee he merely becomes a rubber stamp to their decisions. That administrators be reduced to such subjugation has in fact been openly proposed.³

This is not to say that all college and university administrators dislike all aspects of administration by committee. Much as they sometimes chafe over this usurping of administrative authority, there is another, less unpleasant aspect of the relationship of committees to administrators.

Not infrequently, it is pleasantly convenient to refer unpleasant decisions on controversial matters to a committee to arbitrate, and then to report that "the committee has ruled" such and such. Whether the committee's decision is borne of objective deliberations, without influence of bias or vested interests of its members, is quite another, and unguaranteed, matter.

Another force has been at work in the evolution of administration in colleges and universities. This is a tendency for some administrative officers to forget they are supposed to serve a catalytic effect to the academic functions of

³Circular Letter No. 1 of the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, under date January 3, 1966, cites a quotation which refers to an Eastern college wherein a group of students have declared "that college administrators should be no more than housekeepers in an educational community," and that "the modern college or university should be run by the students and the professors; administrators should be maintenance, clerical and safety personnel whose purpose is to enforce the will of the faculty and students."

²See footnote 3

the institution or segment thereof. Instead administration seems to be evolving as an end instead of a means toward an end.

As educational institutions grow and become more complex, more and more specialized non-academic offices are established to attend to various facets of regulations, and the enforcement of expanding fiscal policies. Each such office takes unto itself power and authority, as do also some of the committees referred to above, tending to relegate department chairmen, and deans and directors, to the status of mere enforcement officers for their edicts.

Here, then, is another inimical force interfering with true leadership. The administrator tends to find himself a high class shuffler of inter-office memoranda and directives from these extraneous sources.

Within the limits of these frustrating complications, and which vary widely among institutions of higher learning, the administrator must find time to think, to think about the talents and weaknesses of each of his subordinates so that he can mobilize and coordinate these talents toward the collective responsibilities and objectives of the organization he heads.

The administrator must find time, or take time, to evaluate the programs under his jurisdiction, in perspective. He must relate these programs to modern trends and developments in society, to establish priorities and make adjustments accordingly.

In July, 1962, at one of their annual summer workshops, the deans and directors of resident instruction in Agriculture, of the land grant colleges and state universities, conferred for three days on "The Role of Administration in the Improvement of Instruction." The keynote address for this conference was presented by President D. W. Colvard of Mississippi State University, who spoke on "What is Good Administration?" Professor George H. White of Oklahoma State University spoke on "What is Good Teaching and How May It Be Evaluated?" Finally, Professor H. T. Morse of the University of Minnesota discussed "Creating A Climate For Good Teaching."

Each of these three excellent and stimulating addresses was followed by extensive group discussions. It fell to the lot of Dean Neal D. Peacock, University of Tennessee, to make the concluding statement for the workshop. Since the "Proceedings" had necessarily limited distribution, it seems pertinent to reproduce the concluding statement here. It is highly meaningful.

"We recognize many threads of thought running through all the lectures, discussions, and summaries. These strands easily unite to form a certain unity and add strength each to the other. Together they give us confidence that we are dealing with the essentials of our responsibility.

"We recognize these aspects:

1. Administration is a means, not an end in itself.
2. Planning is an important ingredient and we must never be smothered by the details which crowd us.
3. A forward look (goals and objectives) is the peculiar responsibility of an effective administrator. The

Biblical quotation, "Where there is no vision the people perish," may be paraphrased, "Where there is an inadequate forward look our resident instruction cannot meet the demands of tomorrow."

4. As administrators our major contribution is the selection, stimulation, and guidance of a competent, dedicated, enthusiastic faculty.

5. With that faculty we share primary concern for the maximum development of our students. They are our product and the reason for our efforts.

6. That nebulous, undefinable circumstance which we call climate is the composite of many factors. Nevertheless, it determines the effectiveness of administration, of good teaching, and of student response.

"A key thought seems an appropriate note on which to conclude. The level of expectancy determines to a major degree the level of performance. We will expect, because of this conference, a higher level of performance for ourselves, will make clear to our faculty a high level of expectancy for their teaching, with them will seek to hold before our students a level of expectancy which will challenge them to their maximum growth."

These workshops and conferences are good, stimulating devices. We come away feeling inspired toward change and improvement. But upon returning home, it is too easy to become engulfed and enmeshed in the daily minutiae (and trivia?), and to lapse back into "business as usual." Inspired as they may be toward innovations for improvement, it is anything but easy for administrators to precipitate any significant changes when dealing with academic staff.

Here is where leadership comes in. If the administrator himself is enthusiastic for some innovation that promises improvement, and has other good, logical reasons for the change, the enthusiasm is likely to be contagious and his faculty will share it. But they have to be sold.

Administration in Academia is leading, not pushing. It is guiding for the present, while planning for a projected future. It is recognition of individuality, without sanction of academic treason. It is benevolent and sagacious exercise of responsibility and authority. It is a challenge to gain the respect and confidence of subordinates without necessarily being "popular."

It is, as President Colvard said, having "a finger on everything, but not in everything," delegating responsibility and commensurate authority to qualified individuals, and within reasonable limits. It is doing all that is possible to establish a good, productive "climate" for teaching or whatever function the concerned unit may have. It is fair and impartial treatment of the individuals and organizational units for which the administrator is responsible.

Any administrator who can meet these criteria should qualify as at least a lovable essobee!