

Chapter XI

The Executive's Office

STANDARD CONDITIONS DESIRABLE. The goals of work and life may be more readily attained if, as far as possible, the major conditions of work and life can be standardized. Toward such standardization, the executive of the social agency can begin moving by attack on the conditions of work in his own office.

(a) *Temperature.* For example, he can regulate the temperature of his office, at least in winter, to the theoretical healthful maximum of 68 or 70 degrees. Conversely, if his office happily is air conditioned (a luxury to which relatively few social work offices have yet attained), he can in hot weather adjust the office temperature to whatever degree (or number of degrees Fahrenheit) will make the ultimate plunge into the outer air not too unendurable.

(b) *Light.* In fulfillment of this belief in the desirability of standardized conditions, the executive will arrange his desk so that the light—natural or artificial—comes over one of his shoulders—his left, if possible. Certainly he can make sure that no glaring light shines directly on or reflects into his eyes by day or night.

(c) *Ventilation.* He can, moreover, prevent papers from blowing on his desk, and yet provide suitable ventilation, by installing inexpensive window ventilators. Benefits of this nature should not, of course, be limited to the executive's office, but should be provided for all staff members.

THE DESK AS WORK BENCH. The efficient executive will also do his utmost to make his desk an efficient work bench.

(a) *Cleared for Action.* The desk, to use a nautical simile, should be like a battleship cleared for action. Nothing should be on or inside the desk except what may be necessary for the day's work. (We shall have more to say on this point later.)

(b) *Flat Tops.* It is almost unnecessary to mention the advantages of flat-topped desks, for the roll-top is now practically extinct in good office practice.

(c) *Linoleum Tops when Possible.* The surface of the flat-topped desk is important. Dark green linoleum makes a good top. It provides a fine writing surface with no varnish to scratch and does not cause a glare from reflected light.

A plate-glass top should be avoided. It is more expensive than any social agency ought to afford. Its cost is greater than that of re-varnishing the desk. It is easily breakable. It does not present a good writing surface. Papers slide all over the glass when the executive tries to write with one hand and hold the telephone receiver with the other. Planting a telephonic elbow on the elusive paper helps somewhat, but this makeshift is quite unreliable. Besides, the hard glass hurts the elbow. The plate-glass top, with its glare of reflected light, is also hard on the eyes. The records which may be kept under it are seldom important. Better a wooden top, scratched and dulled in honorable service, than the extravagant and dazzling pretensions of a plate-glass top.

(d) *Steel vs. Wood.* Much argument prevails over the relative merits of wooden and steel desks. During the Second World War one took what he could get. We got one of wood (painted dark green) with a dark green linoleum top edged with gray plastic. It will do, but we would prefer steel. Wood gouges easily when the dictating machine bumps into it. Also, the circular that came with the desk warned against resting the live end of a lighted cigar or cigarette against the plastic edge—evidently it might blow up in your face! Our pet peeve, however, is the steel desk painted to imitate wood. Be yourself, desk!

(e) *No Gadgets or Litter.* Some executives seem to feel that they must have on their desks great stacks of unfinished work, besides numerous file baskets or other devices for sorting documents and letters (perhaps to give the impression that they are busier than they are), plus a fountain-pen stand, a blotter pad, several family photographs on easels, an elaborate clock, a desk calendar, a golf-ball paper weight, and other distracting gadgets. All these devices disturb concentration—and a busy executive has to concentrate. Keep the top of your desk clear of all but the immediate work you are doing, so that you can clean up that job!

(f) *Desk Auxiliary.* The executive may find it possible to keep his desk clear only by the use of various supplementary devices. The practice of one executive will illustrate this procedure:

Instead of there being a clock on his desk, an electric clock hangs from the wall in front of him, at eye height (where callers can see it,

too). Under the clock hangs a calendar (without advertising) which reveals the current month and the two which precede and follow it.

The desk is set squarely against the wall. (This man declares that he abhors the practice of arranging desks cater-cornered, or sticking out lengthwise from the wall, or in the middle of the room in such a way as to form a sort of fortification behind which the executives lurk or try to look impressive and across which they restrainedly interview callers.)

A table stands at the left of the desk, at right angles to it and touching it. The table backs against the window from which the light comes over the executive's left shoulder. The inner edges of the desk and table form an inverted "L." On the table (and how generously it takes care of all the gadgets and knickknacks!) are the necessary baskets for outgoing mail and material for the files; the dictating machine and rack of cylinders; a telephone; the buzzer button for the executive's secretary; a thermos jug (for water) and a tumbler on a tray; an electric fan in the summer; and a smoking set (it included a nest of ash trays until the charwoman dumped them into the waste basket along with ashes and butts). In the drawer of the table, out of the way, is the telephone book.

This executive feels that his arrangement of table and desk enables him, with less confusion and effort, to turn out through concentrated endeavor more work of a higher quality than would otherwise be possible.

The seminar referred to earlier suggests at this juncture that a shelf might take the place of the table. It would, if big enough. We tried it once. The dictating machine (on a stand) and a typewriter (ditto) slipped underneath the shelf. The only trouble was, the shelf had no drawer and it was put up to stay. We like to move our desk and table around a bit once in a while to see if we can't find a better arrangement—maybe just the change makes it seem better!

(g) *Contents of the Desk.* Within the executive's desk the principle of having closest at hand those things which are most used is followed. Even in the remote recesses should be found only what is likely to be used frequently.

Here is a sample arrangement which we once observed: Across the front of the upper left-hand drawer stood a tickler file. It contained, behind guides for the days and months, ticklers of all scheduled events and activities. Here, too, were guided ticklers of ideas and notes, arranged by subjects, and indexed card lists of the various committees and the board of the agency. In the next space, to-

ward the rear of the drawer, the executive's secretary placed all incoming mail and other documents which required attention.

Into the second drawer (there were only two shallow drawers on the left side) the hopeful user dropped all the papers, pamphlets, and magazines which he intended to take home (hoping sometime to do some professional reading in his "study"). This drawer was supposed to be emptied every night when he left.

Across the front of the wide central drawer above the knee space ran a partitioned steel tray. It contained shears, pencils, an eraser, paper clips, and rubber bands. Behind this tray, side by side, were two notebooks for records so frequently used or so confidential that it seemed advisable not to keep them in the general files.

In the deep drawer on the right was the "Action at Once" folder which we have mentioned in connection with the tickler system. Into that folder went all the things to which the executive was to give immediate attention—mostly by use of the dictating machine. In this drawer, too, were folders for sub-executives. Into these folders the "boss" put memoranda he wished to discuss with his assistants, as well as carbon copies of their instructions and copies of their plans for each week and month to be taken up with them in weekly conferences. Here also were several folders for the "cabinet," which met weekly, and for the board, committees, and projects for which the executive was currently responsible. Into these folders he dropped letters, reports, and pertinent memoranda. We regretted to note that he did not clear these folders out as often as he should. He collected ideas as a squirrel does nuts, and he hated to give them up. Still, no one else wanted these memoranda, or would have known what to do with them. Therefore this executive followed reasonably well the principle that no material which someone else might want should be kept in his desk. Material for general use belongs in the central file where it can be available for all!

This executive's intention, further, was to have nothing in his desk which would not be used within the month. He worked best with his desk stripped for action. He knew where everything was. He was sure that everything would come up for attention at the proper time and that nothing would be neglected (unless he failed to use his "system"). He felt that he was freed for constructive and decisive thought by having an "athletic" desk. It helped him to do better his strenuous job of planning, supervising, and executing.

SEATING ARRANGEMENTS FOR CALLERS. In addition to table and desk, there should be a few chairs for callers. Three may be enough, be-

cause seldom are more than three people in the office at the same time, except for a meeting. For this, additional chairs can be brought in from the outside. The chairs should be comfortable, with arms. They may (and this is not too finicky) match in design the executive's own rubber-tired swivel chair (big-rubber-tired, if possible, to keep it from wearing out the rug or linoleum).

Most executives will not find it necessary to adopt the practice which one harassed business man is said to have used for getting rid of callers. He had the front legs of the main guest chair trimmed off about an inch shorter than the back legs. In consequence, the chair tilted more or less imperceptibly and slid the caller gently but surely forward. This gradual decline made the victim so uncomfortable that, without knowing why, he tried to escape as soon as possible. Social administrators want some of their callers to stay and to be comfortable. The others they can usually dispose of by less mechanical methods. Adjustable chair legs might be useful at times, though!

OFFICE FURNISHINGS. Depending on the executive's wishes, the office may have many other fittings. The man whose desk was just described had on his floor (because it was old and the varnish supplied by the building owner scratched quickly) a plain brown rug (half of a second-hand rug) which matched the furniture and woodwork in color. (For the floor we much prefer linoleum and no rug.) There were two bookcases, brought from his home. In them was a collection of his own books and reference works which pertained more or less to his field of work. These volumes represented, he confessed, his aspiration to reference and reading rather than the actuality.

One shelf in one bookcase was the temporary resting place of all the periodicals, literature, and reports which came in. When our friend was to travel by train, he took with him as much of this material as he could, hoping to clean up a good part of it before his return. When he started on his annual vacation, that shelf was cleared out and all the material in it was taken with him (much to his wife's disgust). It is melancholy to record that, by the time he returned, his office force had already commenced to fill the space again.

This "literature" might, of course, have been piled on the table. There, however, it would have collected dust and been easily disarranged. Again, the printed matter might have been stowed away in the lowest of the shallow drawers of the desk if there had been three of them—but, alas, there were only two! (That is the only argument we know, and it is not a good one, for the three-drawer-deep desk.)

Sectional bookcases with glass doors would without doubt have been much cleaner and more efficient looking than the open bookcases. But the open-shelf bookcases were already available, and the purchase of new ones, in the executive opinion, would have been a violation of one of the principles of efficiency, which is to use the cheapest satisfactory device.

On either side of the two windows in this office were tan pongee curtains, also brought from home. They softened the outlines of the windows and made the room seem less formal. (We are not so much in favor of draperies at office windows as we used to be. Business is business!) There were a few pictures on the walls, mostly enlargements of photographs taken by the room's inhabitant himself.

Another executive we knew decorated his walls with framed, autographed photographs of prominent citizens who had served importantly in his agency, including especially former presidents. Some of the portraits, come to think of it, were not very decorative, although you could not blame the photographer for that. The total effect was that the executive thought he knew the right people. They probably appreciated the tender attention.

Our own present wall decorations are chiefly maps of the city, county, and state, expressive of the nearer and farther reaches of the community which the organization serves. On a shelf stands a plaster cast of the Winged Victory which a devoted office staff, in another city and day, gave us on parting (a pretty symbol of sentiment and aspiration!). Our office, by the way, is only ten feet square, by our own design. Works fine, too!

The seminar previously mentioned suggests that the walls might be decorated further with charts showing the agency's development in finance and service. Maybe so! But they would look as if the executive was keeping his finger on the pulse of the organization and was acting in accordance with his own skilled diagnosis. Actually, wall charts are not much good unless kept up to date, and that process makes them smudgy. We prefer to have our charts (when we have them) drawn, mimeographed, dittoed or photostated, inserted in the ring book in our desk, and mailed in duplicate to responsible personnel. We don't need them so much, though, as we used to think we did. As Cicero inquired, "Quo usque tandem?"—which, roughly translated, means "What the — for?"

At any rate, an executive's office may reflect to a considerable extent his own personality. (Our ebullient seminar will not be downed, though. It likes to see on the walls framed posters and pho-

tographs pertinent to the work of the agency. So do we. Nevertheless we abhor framed photographs of bygone campaign banquets.) There will be something warm and human about a personalized office which will make it more than a mere work room. After all, the administrator spends most of his working hours in his office. Most of his personal contacts are there, too. The office ought to be an expression of its user, within the limits of good taste and businesslike procedure.

EXECUTIVE'S SECRETARY. The effective operation of an executive's office or that of a subexecutive in a departmentalized organization depends in large part on the services of a competent secretary. A good secretary is almost the right and left hand—or at least, a third hand and part of an additional brain—to an executive.

Her duties and responsibilities are many and varied. She will keep the tickler file cleared out, see that incoming mail is put in the proper place, file material in the executive's desk (if he requests it—otherwise how will he know it is there?), look up innumerable addresses and other information, and serve as a buffer for callers who do not really need to see him. She may answer a good deal of his mail, having learned the tone he uses, his style of writing, and the kind of answer he is likely to give on more or less routine questions. She may look up and sort out in advance the information necessary for the answering of letters. She may to an extraordinary degree free her chief of detail and liberate him for the constructive phases of his work which require originality and planning. She may make his engagements for him. With his advice, she may type out his daily schedule. She will keep the records in his desk up to date and in good shape. A good secretary is a veritable jewel almost beyond price—although most secretaries are not paid quite on that basis.

It is usually undesirable for the secretary to share the executive's office. The presence of a third person is always an impediment to the kind of confidential conversation which is sometimes necessary. The talk may be with a member of the staff who must be reprimanded or with whom confidential relationships have to be worked out, or it may be with the representative of another organization, a public official, or a client of the agency. The caller may not realize that the secretary is discreet. In any case, her presence is bound to inhibit the full and free interchange of opinions and of confidence.

Although it is convenient to have the secretary close at hand, this need is not so great as is sometimes imagined. If the executive uses a dictating machine, his secretary need come to his office only when

he buzzes for her to take cylinders or when she brings him messages or mail. It should not be necessary for the secretary to come into his office oftener than an average of half a dozen times a day. The interval between dictating and getting back the transcribed material is usually so short as to fill most of the executive's needs for prompt action.

Many an executive has solved this problem by putting his desk close to the partition between his office and that in which the secretary works. In this partition there may be a window of translucent glass which either slides or swings back and forth. The translucent glass enables the secretary to see whether the executive is busy, without distracting either his attention or that of callers. The window can be opened easily to pass material in and out or to exchange information. With that arrangement, the executive does not need many personal file folders. The secretary can have an auxiliary file in which everything needful may be kept instantly available.

CLEAR GLASS IN THE DOOR. Such a window suggests a further point of office procedure which may be desirable. If the executive has a private office, it is wise to have clear glass in the door to prevent interruption by staff members and callers, who when the door is closed can see through the glass whether he is occupied or not.

Clear glass is also a protection against charges of indecorous conduct which might be made or threatened by a member of the other sex for blackmail purposes. The social work executive is dependent upon his good repute, and he might easily be victimized if hidden behind blank walls and frosted glass. Moreover, similar charges might be made, merely as gossip, by those who did not know what was going on behind an unglazed door and feared—or hoped—for the worst. The appearance of innocence is the best protection for the guiltless.

Further, it is probably a good policy for the executive to be seen to be busy and evidently accessible. Clear glass in the door or partition may occasionally make him feel like the traditional goldfish in a bowl. It may also expose him to some unexpected and unwanted callers. Yet these afflictions are necessary accompaniments of what should be his general policy of complete publicity and openness to public inspection. He has to live most of his life in the public gaze. He might as well have symbolically clear glass in the door—and keep the door open, too, except when closing is temporarily necessary.

With an office arranged according to these general ideas, in spite

of interruptions from the staff and the public the executive should be in good shape, mechanically, to turn out his work rapidly and efficiently.

QUESTIONS

1. What does the best executive you know do about regulating the temperature of his own office?
2. How does he control the light?
3. What does he do about the ventilation?
4. What kind of desk does he have?
5. In what condition does he keep it?
6. What kind of working surface does it have?
7. What kind of equipment or ornaments does he keep on it?
8. Does he use any desk auxiliary, such as a table, stand, or shelf?
9. What is the relationship of this auxiliary, in location, to the desk?
10. What does he keep on this auxiliary?
11. What equipment and material does he keep in his desk? (Better ask him if he minds your calling for all this personal information. If you cannot find a docile executive, try these questions on yourself, but try them anyway.)
12. What other furnishings and decorations does the executive you have selected have in his office?
13. What services does his secretary perform?
14. Is the secretary's desk in his office?
15. Does he have a private office or share one with others? If the latter, what is the arrangement?
16. Does he have clear glass in his door (if there is a door)?
17. How do you think the procedure in these various respects might be improved?