

Operating on One's Proper Level

MUCH OF THE GENERAL FEAR about big government arises from reflection on the limited capacity of the human mind. Mr. Justice Brandeis and many others endowed like him with superior minds have found in this limitation the basis of a social philosophy that would frankly limit the scope of organized effort. They are convinced that giant organizations can never be adequately comprehended and efficiently managed, especially that they cannot be so managed as to protect and advance the delicate values of hundreds of thousands of diverse personalities.

It is no reflection on the thinking of the gifted men and women who adopt this view to suggest that it is the position which ordinary citizens of less reflective capacity will also tend to take and that emphasis on other aspects of the problem of public management may contribute to a better adjustment to modern trends and necessities. It is neither possible nor necessary to refute the arguments of those who insist on emphasizing the finite character of the human mind. But to say this is not to admit that the limits in administrative management have now been reached. Until we have studied carefully the high capacity of the human mind to devise finer and ever finer ways of organizing and apportioning administrative functions and responsibilities, no one can know how close we are to those outer limits.

There are distinctly reactionary implications in mere insistence on human incapacity, just as there are reactionary implications in a simple insistence that privilege inevitably begets decay. These two propositions are usually asserted at the right and left ends of the social spectrum and directed at each other rather than toward any central truth. Both argue that civilization is impossible. Yet it is not hard to believe that privileges often really are advantages. And it is not hard to believe that the mind can comprehend more than it now comprehends. Taking any point in history, who can say that humanity could not have sustained one added measure of complexity or that a par-

particular group of people would have been forced on the decline by the grant of one new privilege?

Even if the trend toward larger organization be not progressive, we do face the necessity for adjustment to it. That requires consideration of how to enable and to help limited minds to make the best possible success of the job of management which is presented to them.

Philosophers in Administration

There are many old misconceptions needing clarification and many new conceptions calling for elucidation. One of the things most needing to be understood now is the increased practical value of the so-called abstract mind. Up to now we have advanced by a process of division of labor that is called specialization. There are today thousands of markedly different kinds of jobs in which men can employ their talents. But as we have specialized, the practical need for generalization and synthesis has grown in geometric ratio. Thus our elaborate division of labor puts a new value on persons with capacity of a sort that approaches philosophy. Handlers of artifacts we have in abundance, but we have a desperate and growing need in our day for men and women who can deal in relationships.

The process of administration—especially large-scale administration—is the process of moving matters up and down, to and from successive levels of abstraction. There is no more difficult problem than that of getting at the highest level persons sufficiently broad in their perceptions and with enough capacity for the abstract to deal effectively with the issues that require to be settled at that level. If we prize that kind of ability in our highest administrative posts and cultivate it sufficiently, we can entrust public management with far greater tasks than we safely could otherwise.

But the inclination still runs strongly the other way. Experience is thought to be the great qualification. To be sure it has its values, but popularly we misunderstand and overrate them. The result is that, figuratively speaking, we put a man in the post of supervising architect because he has had twenty years of experience as a bricklayer. Persons who perform well at the top rarely if ever do so because they have had more experience than anyone else in all the divisions of their organization. Nor do they succeed because they

have had more experience in some one particular division of the organization. Louis Brownlow once said that if you need to select an executive and choose a county agent for the position, if you make a good selection, he will invariably be a good executive with respect to everything except things having to do with county agents.

Men who go far in governmental administration usually have to get there by large leaps. If they function well on a high level to which they jump, their success cannot be due to greater experience in everything in the field below that level. They succeed because they have special qualities. How to discover in advance whether a person has the qualities needed there is the rub. Yet, though it is impossible regarding either a frog or a man to tell by looking at him how far he can jump, we should be able, by taking thought, steadily to enhance our ability to appraise the jumping ability of individuals.

Using county agents again for illustrative purposes, there may be a few who after a year or two of service will have a vivid understanding of the functions of county agents in the United States, but some of them would almost have to serve in all 3,000 counties before developing such an understanding. These latter might be fairly good agents, understandingly zealous with regard to the problems of their own localities, but they should never be brought to Washington. Those of the first category are, on their level, of the general order from which Washington should recruit its staff.

Higher Levels Distinguished

There are, of course, many more levels than are recognized by the writers of personnel classification acts. It is obvious, however, that many times more persons are experienced in and able to discuss administrative matters relating to the so-called lower levels than are able to discuss them on the higher levels. It will therefore be most useful for us here to focus attention on the bureau, departmental, secretarial, interdepartmental, governmental, and Presidential levels. These are the levels hardest to understand and most difficult to staff. The chief problems about government that disturb thoughtful citizens are problems having to do with the responsibilities of administration on those levels. All of them are governmental in that they are in and of the government. It is moreover essential that administra-

tors be public-minded in their attitudes on every level. But the requirements in perspective and method of procedure are definitely different on these various levels.

Every bureau head is, in a way, a specialist. Even if he may not have been a specialist before his appointment, it is practically inevitable that he will become one—a specialist in the particular field in which his bureau operates. If, however, before his appointment he was a specialist in a single segment of the bureau's work, he becomes steadily less a specialist and more a generalist. In any case, his success depends on his ability to remain or become able to spread himself over the whole of the bureau's field and to be a specialist only in the sense that the broadest reach of the bureau is specialized. His success depends in no small measure, too, on his ability to be a bridge from his bureau to his department and to the government. He needs to be able to fit his bureau into the department and into the government. He needs to have an imaginative perception of the secretary's needs as the secretary manages his own responsibilities—the secretary's need fairly to understand and deal with his other bureaus, the secretary's need intelligently to relate the work of his department to that of other governmental agencies, the secretary's need to be imaginative and sympathetic in relation to the President and his responsibilities.

Any bureau head will bend to departmental and governmental restrictions and requirements. But he may bend only as a tree bends in the wind. What is desirable is that he have the ability to bend in imaginative understanding of his department and of the government. He can thereby enormously enhance his value and his effectiveness. Some bureau chiefs cannot see outside of their own bureaus. Without exception they are inadequate to their jobs. A good chief must be a zealous champion of the functions and the personnel of his bureau, but he must also be a bridge between his more narrowly zealous specialists and his more broadly responsible superiors.

Every bureau chief needs to organize his bureau so that he can carry his special responsibilities effectively and still have time and energy to assist importantly in relating his bureau to the entire government—that is to say, to society as a whole. Most of the commonly expressed fears of bureaucrats amount in reality to a demand on the

part of government executives for broad perception and a widened sense of responsibility. Yet in specific situations the public expects and demands that they act as specialists, keeping within a narrow range of interest, experience, and perception. It is therefore extremely difficult, and to a considerable degree impossible, for anyone who has served long in the position of a bureau chief to change suddenly to departmental administration and function effectively on that level. It is much easier to make the change the other way. It has been my experience to observe this fact time and again: men do not move readily from bureau to departmental or governmental administration, but they can and do move successfully from the departmental or governmental to the bureau level. Bureau officials generally show on the departmental level a limitation somewhat similar to the limitations of most men who have specialized in business. In both instances there has been too much concentration of interest, too narrow a viewpoint, too little of that broad perspective which is needed so greatly by those in high administrative positions.

Individuals in departmental offices should perform of broader mind than their opposites in bureaus. An \$1,800 junior assistant in the departmental personnel office should be fundamentally broader in outlook and range of interest than his \$1,800 opposite number in a bureau. They may both work on classification of positions, but the one in the bureau needs only the capacity to understand the relationships of positions in that bureau, whereas the one in the departmental office needs to understand relationships between sets of positions in all the bureaus combined.

The same difference should exist between officials on the governmental or interdepartmental and those on the departmental level. Those individuals whose responsibilities relate to the entire government should obviously be broader in outlook than those whose duties are circumscribed by the concerns of a single department.

Suiting One's Action to One's Level

Such actions as are taken on these several different levels should likewise be correspondingly different. For anyone in a departmental position to exercise a bureau judgment, or for a person in a governmental position to exercise a departmental judgment, is sheer

duplication (often the only important duplication to be found in government) and productive of confusion rather than effective management. The higher the level, the more general should be the nature of the judgment exercised.

The only basis on which governmental management can succeed is for officials operating on the governmental level resolutely to refrain from operating on any other than the governmental level. They can best keep to their proper sphere by continually asking themselves questions like these: What are the aspects of this matter that have a different significance when looked at from the standpoint of the government as a whole? What are the things I can contribute because of my special knowledge of the President's policy, of other departments, of other analogous matters which have come up elsewhere in the past? What are the things I need to know about it, out of all there is to know, for me to exercise the kind of judgment I ought to exercise? What are the things I have to watch for on behalf of the President? What are the determinations that, because of my position, I can make better than they would probably be made by equally good departmental officials?

There is more inadequacy in government because of the inability of officials to operate on their proper levels than from any other single cause. But such inadequacy is not inevitable, it is not something that cannot be improved; it is not something predetermined by the limits of the human mind. It stems chiefly from a failure to realize the importance of taking careful note of the qualities of mind, temperament, and personality required for a position on a given level and then searching for those qualities in the person to be appointed. Once there is a realization of the crucial need of abstract, generalizing minds at the top—minds broad and yet incisive, minds interested in ideas, concepts, analogies, and relationships and possessed of a political sense and a leader's "feeling for action"—we can accomplish a great deal in identifying individuals with the needed qualifications. And we shall in time be able to develop more such persons.

Need of Public Understanding

It is almost as important for the public to understand the way in which high public officials should operate as it is for that way to be

understood by the officials themselves. For public and Congressional expectation of the wrong kind of procedure on high administrative levels does much to prevent more efficient administration.

However much the public may be conscious of the size of the great governmental department, few citizens have any real notion of the actuality. When several persons call upon the secretary to discuss some particular matter with him, they never suspect that his department may at that very time be handling thousands of similar actions, of equivalent interest to thousands of groups like the one making the call. They cannot understand that the secretary cannot properly act solely on the basis of their call. Yet he cannot do so because he would then be acting in ignorance of factors governing related cases that he has not heard. He would be handling their case out of focus. The secretary needs to give such matters organizational attention rather than personal attention. He is responsible, and he should be responsible, chiefly for *the way in which such matters are handled*, rather than for the handling of specific actions.

Like other intelligent citizens, even the members of the Supreme Court fail sometimes to understand the nature of the responsibility of the secretary of a department. In a recent decision, as in several earlier ones, the Court, by requiring the head of an agency himself to handle a specific matter, actually made it certain that the matter would be handled less efficiently than it had been previously. This was in the case of *Cudahy v. Holland*, a wage and hour decision handed down in 1942. One long paragraph in the majority decision contains a discussion of administration. This is altogether appropriate, because law should not be considered apart from its administration. But the paragraph is based on an assumption that delegated power is more likely to be poorly used than power exercised directly by a commissioner serving as one of the heads of an agency. My own belief is that the contrary is true—as indeed four of the nine members of the Court held. Only those department heads who spend the great bulk of their time directing the *way* in which things are done, instead of doing them themselves, will get superior results.

It happens occasionally that high officials, not fully understanding their own functions and working under pressure from other officials and the public, assume a specific competence they do not have. They

make the error of trying to live up to outsiders' ideas of their official competence and responsibility and interfering consequently in matters on which it is both unwise and inappropriate for them to expend either their time or energy. On the other hand, visitors seeking authoritative action from a department head are frequently confused and disappointed by their inability to get the result they desire. The remedy in both cases is a clear understanding of the necessity for every official to function always on his proper level.

Only those matters should be handled by high officials personally which have developed to the point where the judgment needing to be exercised is general in character. Some specific questions have or acquire an importance to warrant that kind of attention. Where other, less important matters demand attention by top officials, they should treat them as ways of finding out how such things are being handled—that is to say, as samples rather than in terms of their own intrinsic importance. By handling them on this basis officials can readily make sure that they are considered with proper regard for other similar items to which they have not been able to give their attention.

Importance of Delegation

"Delegation" is a term widely used but little understood. What a major executive does not do and will not do is fully as important as what he does do. Every top administrator worthy of his position must make these distinctions clearly in his own mind. If he makes them wisely, he will give those executives below him positions of real importance.

Of a piece with delegation is the minor but essential matter of understanding the organization of office routine. For example, there are many techniques for reducing the number and length of appointments, but they are too little used by many executives no less than by persons having business with them. Those who feel they must needs see a top executive in person can, by taking thought, always find ways of saying what they have to say in fewer words than they first think they need. Invariably they would help themselves by doing so. Yet callers are rarely direct. Often it takes an executive half an hour to find out what it is they want. They "beat around the bush" when the best thing they could do for their own good would

be to give the official the bare minimum of information required to enable him to take action on their problem.

It may be that a few words of advice on this score would be in order. What is said above has been written with reference chiefly to citizens who wish to get attention on their problems—not so much to public administrators in their work with one another, although it applies also to them—and particularly to those citizens who feel that they must “go to the top.” Callers at the office of a high official should, whenever possible, bring with them written statements of what they seek so that, following the conference, the official may refer the matter promptly to his appropriate sub-executive. To expect a top official during a busy day to recapitulate the details of a conference to that executive orally is to expect an impossibility. Usually the best possible result of a conference with a high official is that he will ask an aide to “call John Smith and see what is on his mind.”

But often there will simply be no possibility of arranging for a conference, in that case the citizen will do well to remember that telephone conversations with top executives are often actually better than personal interviews. For then an aide to the official can listen in and, at the end, make the necessary references and make them promptly. Good office management dictates that a high official should almost never make a single note of a telephone call and should almost never have to remember to think about a follow-up. Ordinarily, however, a letter would be still better than a telephone call. It can give a full description of the matter on the citizen's mind and can be routed immediately to the person competent to handle it.

In an earlier paragraph I said that what top executives should not do is as important as what they should do and that erroneous expectations by the public are an important factor in making them give time to things they should delegate to others. Somehow many citizens feel that if only they could “get to the Secretary”—or to the President—things would happen as they wish them to happen. They are grossly mistaken. Nine times out of ten the citizen will get the maximum of favorable action by seeking out and going to the official who is immediately responsible for the particular matter in which the citizen is interested. Why expect it to be otherwise? This is as it should be.

There are exceptions, of course, but nothing can better illustrate

the point than the case of job-seekers and those who are recommending job-seekers. In a department the size of the Department of Agriculture, for months in succession, personnel actions of all kinds may average more than 800 a day. Obviously personnel administration has to be organized. Because of Civil Service laws, classification acts, departmental regulations, and other necessary adjuncts to systematic management, most heads of departments come and go without knowing much about personnel procedures. They do learn—and quickly—that they have, for this general reason, little chance to make arbitrary selections of persons to be hired, demoted, or discharged. Appropriation acts, for example, are written to crush such arbitrary power; no secretary can force a bureau to hire a person for whom there is no salary available. Each bureau is responsible for planning its activities, within the usually quite precise limits of the appropriation act which programs its expenditures. The secretary finds he cannot hold his bureaus responsible if he begins telling them in detail how to organize and run their work. He must be content to give them general directions and through his offices of finance and personnel check their specific actions against such objective standards as he may be able to devise.

The secretary can prescribe general standards and procedures, but can effectively select only his own personal staff and the heads of the various offices and bureaus. So with the heads of bureaus and offices; they can select only their own principal executives, for the latter, in turn, must have equally the right to select, within the limits of general regulations, *their* principal executives. And so on down the whole hierarchal line.

No one is in a worse position in any organization than the person who has been employed as a result of special pressure from a higher executive or from an outside person of influence. His boss will resent the fact that he has to spend his budget money for someone he did not want. He will be afraid that the unwanted employee will not submit to discipline, that he will carry tales about things he does not understand, and that he cannot be fired if found incompetent. The unwanted employee becomes an excuse for everything that goes wrong. All in all, the employee who relies on pull to get a job will be,

on the average, a less desirable employee than the one who sells himself to the man who will be his immediate boss.

Any secretary who tries to select personnel here and there throughout his department is bound to be a poor executive. He will have crosslines of authority, gnawing jealousy, and wasteful friction and confusion. He can be effective as an administrator only by making sure that the men he makes responsible are actually responsible.

Yet, be all this as it may, millions of citizens believe that a Cabinet secretary can be responsible for his department only if he personally selects all its employees. It follows that the job-hunter and the friend who recommends him are "pains in the neck" for all high officials. Obviously the abstract power to hire and fire must vest in the secretary. It is essential to his authority. But it must be used, except in the most extraordinary circumstances, in an organized way. It must be delegated if it is to be exercised wisely and effectively.

Within a department, matters requiring secretarial attention can be and usually are so presented that he can see what he needs to know almost at once. One common technique is to have a series of memoranda covering a single item of business. The first will usually consist of a single page describing the matter, citing the particular issue involved, indicating the recommendation with respect to the issue, and noting which interested bureau and staff officers concur and which ones dissent. Successive memoranda would be progressively more detailed; the docket thereunder would contain all relevant information. The secretary can then go as far into the matter as he may think it necessary.

Eyes on the Woods

But neither these mechanical and organizational techniques nor even the willingness to delegate can make a good administrator out of an executive lacking the capacity to think in terms of woods rather than of trees. Top executives must be able to deal with columns of figures rather than with figures themselves; with large bodies of men, not merely with individual persons; with twelve million bales of cotton, not merely with cotton farming; and with the relationships between the twelve million bales of cotton, two and a half billion

bushels of corn, the bulb-growers in Oregon, the peanut-growers in southside Virginia, the Texas delegation, and the Ottawa Agreement. Knowing how to feed a steer or how to buy a steak is not important for a Secretary of Agriculture. It is important, however, that he be able to look at a report on meat supplies and see the necessity for rationing and the propriety of trying to get equitable distribution of meat by compulsory wartime extension of Federal meat inspection. To insist on having as Secretary of Agriculture a man who "knows his steers" is becoming increasingly irrelevant. But to insist on having a secretary who will know, or will be able to perceive quickly, how farmers will react to a given action is still to be extremely relevant.

Government is concerned with the public-interest aspects of everything people do, whether individually or in groups. Those public-interest aspects change from time to time. But whatever they are, they are brought into focus only in government. If they are national in their significance, they come into focus in the national government. If of another order, they fall within the spheres of state or local government. These levels of government in its most inclusive sense have their counterparts within administrative organization where they are fully of comparable importance. With regard to public administration no less than public policy, the necessity of getting things handled on their proper level is of the essence of good government.

The perfection of arrangements for administrative matters handled on their proper level is a job for generalists—managerial, philosophical, political generalists. In organizing such arrangements the generalist will use the specialist in a multitude of important ways, but he will use him as a specialist or, in other words, as a technician. In so far as a businessman serves government well *because* he is a businessman, he will serve as a technician, advising the government about his field of business or industry. In so far as a farmer or a banker or an economist or a chemist serves government well *because* of his competence as such, he will serve as a technician, functioning in government as a farmer, as an economist, as a chemist, or *advising* government about farming, economics, or chemistry.

Patently there are levels also for technicians. In the Department of Agriculture one of our problems has been to find, among a huge number of botanists, chemists, physicists, zoologists, geneticists,

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ecologists, and a host of other specialists, a few scientific generalists. We have found that it is much easier to find a good enzyme chemist than to find a chemistry generalist, and much easier to find a chemistry generalist than to find a science generalist. The analogy holds, we may be sure, throughout the whole vast range of government.

We must be more diligent both in searching for and in educating men and women who will be able to operate effectively on the higher, broader levels of public administration in our big democracy.