

Principal
characteristics of the
weberian ideal type
bureaucracy- roles of
power ...



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INTRODUCTION

Bureaucracy has been studied for a long time now and many organizations have adopted this model in the day to day running of their organization. The aim of this essay is to explore the “ Ideal type” bureaucracy developed by Max Weber, its characteristics, the role of power and authority on it and its strengths and weaknesses. Firstly we would look at various definitions of bureaucracy drawn from other writers.

Bureaucracy in its ideal form is a “ rationalized moral alternative to the common practices of nepotism and other abuses of power that were rampant in the feudal preindustrial world from which the modern industrial organization emerged” (Hatch, 2006, p. 105). Bureaucracies rely on combination of rules, procedures, documentation and behavioral monitoring to achieve control and seek to place a standard on behavior and the reward for compliance with established rules and regulation (Hatch, 2006, p. 117). Bureaucracy can be seen as a primary drive through which rationality is used as an instrument within the modern society so as to exclude alternative criteria for action. (Du Gay, 2000, p. 38).

Bureaucracy as a concept has come a long way, beginning from France in the eighteenth century. It originates from the French word for an office “ bureau” rule of the bureau. In the 19th century, Germany experienced great success in its use; it was used in both its armed forces and civil administration (Clegg, Kornberger, & Tyrone, 2008). Weber discovered that the modernity of Germany was made possible mainly because of the discipline of bureaucracy . It was used in the military to exhibit discipline,

using acts such as “ goose stepping”, it assured the generals of the complete obedience of their recruits to order, and for civilians it meant that the men were drilled like machines to eliminate insubordination and individualism (Clegg, Kornberger, & Tyrone, 2008, p. 46) . As modern industrial organizations emerged in Germany they incorporated some of this form of ruling and it was a success, by the 20th century it became popular, the United States increasingly started adopting it for modern management, especially after the World War 1 when they noticed that the German economy had significantly improved. Bureaucratic forms were also developed internationally as a superstructure on a rationalized basis produced by systems such as that of Fredrick Taylor; these rational superstructures triggered Weber’s productive research inquiries into the nature of rationality, rules and bureaucracy (Clegg, Kornberger, & Tyrone, 2008, p. 46). Weber’s view of bureaucracy was as an instrument of unrivaled technical superiority, he wrote that precision, speed and clarity, knowledge of files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and material and personal cost are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration; Bureaucracy was a rational machine and was based on how peoples in an organization use the rules of an organization as an everyday guide to management (Clegg, Kornberger, & Tyrone, 2008, p. 46).

Bureaucracy is supposed to be a system of administration continuously executed by trained professionals following set rules; according to Weber, system administration has to meet all the characteristics of a bureaucracy before it can be called one (Beetham, 1996, p. 10). Examples of everyday

bureaucracies include the Armed forces and Corporations such as General motors and NASA. Weber explained that the closer a company is to his model, the more efficient it was likely to become. Bureaucratic control depends upon the existence of a legitimized hierarchy of authority to administer the bureaucratic mechanisms and closely supervise and direct subordinates (Beetham, 1996, p. 13). It is argued that “ Weber failed to recognize the ambivalent character of bureaucracy, partly because studies of organization were in their infancy in the early decades of the century and also because his ideas were unduly influenced by Prussian army and the Taylorian system” (Beetham, 1996, p. 13). It can also be argued that bureaucracy is gradually being replaced due to requirements of entrepreneurial development which gives room for individual innovations (Casey 2004, p. 59). Bureaucracy as an important aspect of rationalizing modernity still endures because some certain characteristics of bureaucracy cannot be avoided in order for an efficient and effective running of an organization. Its aim is to prevent forces of unreason, disorder and disorganization (Casey 2004, p. 60) Weber’s theory of bureaucracy developed out of a general theory of power domination which is explained later on in the essay.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE WEBERIAN “ IDEAL TYPE” BUREAUCRACY

Weber used the term “ Ideal” in the sense of a pure idea, something that can only be imagined rather than in a perfect situation , it provides a foundation for theorizing because they are abstract they cannot be expected to exist in the world around us (Hatch, 2006, p. 102) . The ideal bureaucracy that

Weber imagined was a means for turning employees of average ability into
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rational decision makers, serving their customers with impartiality and efficiency; This bureaucratic form promised reliable decision making, merit based selection, promotion, impersonality and impartiality and therefore fair application of rules (Hatch, 2006, p. 102).

Weber's 'ideal type' theory offered the following characteristics outlined below:

A fixed division of labour: The central feature of bureaucracy is division of labour coordinated under a centralized hierarchy of command. It creates interdependencies in an organization which is managed mainly through hierarchy of authority and standardizing rules and procedures and supported by documenting procedures, regulations, rules and other prescriptions (Walton, 2005, p. 573)

A clearly defined hierarchy: Each office has its own clearly defined responsibility and competence. Hierarchical structures improve coordination by restricting free-flowing communications within components (Walton, 2005, p. 573). The hierarchy that workers are subject to at the workplace, Weber argued was required by the organization with complex technical and production processes, it is therefore required to coordinate division of labour (Beetham, 1996, p. 56).

Bureaucracy is characterized by expertise because candidates for office are selected on the basis of merit and qualification, and Promotion is guaranteed according to seniority of achievement, and rewarded by fixed salaries paid in money (Hatch, 2006, p. 102). On employment, the office is the primary

occupation of the employee and the employee looks forward to a long life
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career in the organization, and this promotes continuity in an organization (Hatch, 2006, p. 102).

Official work is to be separate from ownership of the means of administration; this implies impersonality and Impartiality (Hatch, 2006, p. 102). Work is conducted according to set rules without “ arbitrariness and favoritism” (Beetham, 1996, p. 9) everybody would be treated equally by the books.

A set of general rules governing the performance of offices, strict discipline and control in the conduct of the office is expected. Rules, documents and filing is the order of the day as they govern official decision making and action. When we think of bureaucracy, we often think of ‘ red tape’ the strict adherence to formalities (Hatch, 2006, p. 102). Therefore bureaucracy is characterized by high formalization

ROLES OF POWER AND AUTHORITY IN THE WEBERIAN IDEAL TYPE BUREAUCRACY

Weber sees the rule of man over man in the society as an inevitable historical phenomenon; he distinguished between power and rule stating that the former hinges on having ones way in a social relationship and the latter as getting things done through specific channels persons (Warner, 2007, p. 1024).

Authority is a source of power; other sources of power include personal character, expertise, coercion, control; one main difference between authority and other sources of power is that the exercise of authority is directed downward in organizations while the exercise of other forms of

power may work in all directions (Hatch, 2006, p. 254). Authority particularly stands out because it is associated with hierarchy, part of the social structure of organizations (Hatch, 2006, p. 254).

Weber believed that in a bureaucratic organization members adhere to the rules of that organization, he contrasted three types of authority namely (Clegg, Kornberger, & Tyrone, 2008, pp. 46-48):

Charismatic authority: when respect and obedience will be given because of the extraordinary attractiveness, popularity and power of a person. The person is owed homage because of his or her capacity to project personal qualities; people follow them because of what they believe to be the special nature of their personalities and the success they have achieved. E. g.

Princess Diana, Mother Theresa and Nelson Mandela

Traditional authority: occurs where respect and obedience are owed because the person who holds it by birthright. Prince Charles, for instance is not so much an authority because of his charisma, but because of tradition.

Rational-legal authority signifies that respect and obedience are owed not to the person or the title they hold but to the role they fill. It is the office respected and not the officer because it is a part of a rational and recognized disposition of relationships in a structure of offices. For instance, a police officer is respected because of the office he represents and individuals would act rationally by obeying the rules of this office because of the consequences of not obeying. Weber's view of bureaucracy was a tool for unequalled technical advantage. He wrote that "...precision, speed and unambiguity,

knowledge of files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination,
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reduction of friction and material and personal cost are raised to an optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration". Bureaucracy was a rational machine. The outcome of this process of rationalization, Weber suggests is the production of a new type of person: the specialist (Clegg, Kornberger, & Tyrone, 2008). Things may be done in formally and substantive rational ways, the difference between the two is that the former involves precise techniques of calculation such as those developed to measure technical efficiency or to track costs while the latter refers to the reason for rational action, that is, its meaning and value (Hatch, 2006); He warned that formal rationalization without substantive rationalization would lead to 'iron cage' which Weber described as the dark side of bureaucracy. The drive for rationality, calculation and control may increase efficiency but also trap an individual in an iron cage that chokes creativity and free will. The charismatic and legal forms of authority may coexist in an organization for example an employee may respect his immediate supervisor because of his charisma and the way he does his work and may decide to make him his mentor, even though they both are subordinates in the same organization (Hunt & Micheal, 1983).

Rational-legal precepts, is exactly what Weber identified as the heart of bureaucratic organizations. People obey orders rationally because they believe that the person giving the order is acting in accordance with a code of legal rules and regulations. For Weber, the modern organization differed from other forms of organization because of its rationalization of authority and legality; The rational-legal bureaucrat was similarly characterized by technical and professional expertise (Casey, 2004 p. 65).

WEAKNESSES OF THE BUREAUCRATIC FORM OF ORGANIZATION

Bureaucracy has to a large extent contributed immensely to the growth of modern organization and in its contributions lays some weaknesses that result from the application of its features in the following paragraphs.

Bureaucracy is characterized by high formalization which is defined as the degree to which rules procedures, regulations and communications are written and filed (Walton, 2005, p. 570) . Everything should be done by the book and this leads to the feeling of impersonality often associated with bureaucratic organizations that does not allow employees to be committed emotionally to the pursuit of economic efficiency, which is the overall goal of the organization; it restricts them because of culture of impersonality and detachment (Stokes & Clegg, 2002, p. 227). Employees must share a managerial vision of their organization's culture and be prepared to go an extra mile to achieve it, not just to following rules, rules should be bent sometimes to ensure that a desired outcome is achieved, there is a limit to how much of your work you can rely on policy and guideline (Clegg, Kornberger, & Tyrone, 2008, p. 88). Therefore, Bureaucracy strangles individualism because everything has to be done in a machine-like manner.

Weber's model of organization efficiency assumes that aspects of individual personality which are not relevant to the strict performance of employee's duties would be removed as they enter the organization (Beetham, 1996, p. 13). In practice, people come into an organization with personal needs and expect to seek satisfaction to an extent through social interaction at workplace, the manner this interactions are dealt with at work can be crucial to the performance of the employee. Authority which ignores these factors is <https://assignbuster.com/principal-characteristics-of-the-weberian-ideal-type-bureaucracy-roles-of-power-and-authority/>

likely to meet resistance because people cannot be compelled to work efficiently or with commitment (Beetham, 1996, p. 14). When this resistance surfaces, there is likely to be conflict in the organization which may disrupt organizational goals.

Promotion is based on merit ; unqualified personnel may keep getting promoted on seniority bases because the organization may think they merit the promotion because of how long they have stayed (Casey, 2009). In this case, they may not be actually qualified for the promotion given that division of labour encourages specialization because of the standardization of production process. They may have deep knowledge for a particular skill, but not other skills that they may require for higher level. Division of labor can then lead to a situation where an employee cannot do anything than other than what he is trained to do and finds it impossible to operate in a different situation, because of inflexibility. This impedes self development of employees (Casey, 2009) and limits creativity.

Communication comes in one direction because of the hierarchical structure; some information may need to be passed from grassroots upwards sometimes so that employers can get from employees feedback vital for growth of an organization, a hierarchy may suffer from too much information as well as little information (Beetham, 1996, p. 14). A less hierarchical structure may be more flexible.

Goals may become displaced in bureaucracy because of strict adherence to rules, because the aims of the organization become identified with following the rules that are only intended as means to achieving goals (Clegg,

Kornberger, & Tyrone, 2008, p. 89). When this happens it also disrupts the overall aim and objectives of the organization. For example, if a school's department's aim is to ensure that the students in class understand the lectures and graduate with good grades. In order to achieve that, the students' attendance in class would be very necessary but if a lecturer uses half an hour to count the students in class and write attendance, it becomes a displaced goal because the time used in counting the number of students in class can be used to teach them more effectively.

Therefore, these weaknesses discussed have a tendency to become vast, cumbersome, slow and rigid, reduced efficiency because of following usual protocol, not enough freedom of movement, over compliance etc (Casey 2009).

STRENGTHS OF THE BUREAUCRATIC FORM OF ORGANIZATION

Strength of bureaucracy becomes more evident in stable environments with compliant employees (Morgan, 1995, p. 29). Authority and responsibility are clearly defined due to hierarchy and division of labour (Casey 2009) and when it is defined there is unity of command which leads to efficiency because employees know who instructs and what to do because there is free flowing communication in the sense that information is not muddled up and there is no confusion because information is centralized and comes from one source, flows from upward downward. Bureaucracy is a wall for civil freedom. (Clegg, Kornberger, & Tyrone, 2008, p. 67).

There is fairness and impartiality in bureaucracy (Casey 2009), all employees are treated in the same way, and they do not have to worry about

impartiality, unless of course if politics arises in the organization and it starts to affect the rules of the book. You have the right to appeal in bureaucracy if the rules applied are illegitimate; no one is above the law, none could escape rules, and every officer was accountable for what they do because they have specialized tasks, work done is easily traced to who did it.

Technical and formal efficiency i. e. expertise of office holders (Casey 2009), standardization of processes brings about efficiency, in that every process is done at the time it is supposed to be done, just as efficiently as machines.

Personnel selection and promotion based on expertise and merit, rational-legal authority does not go through the rigorous process of finding another leader in case one is lost, there are endless supplies of people to whom it can give authority because it can make rational choices on the basis of superior leadership and merit (Casey 2009), specialization promotes this expertise which retains knowledge and deep understanding of a particular field. (Casey 2009).

CONCLUSION

This essay explores the Weberian ideal type bureaucracy, we look at different definitions of it, characteristics, the role power and authority has to play, by focusing on the rational-legal type of authority which is the heart of bureaucracy. We also analyzed the strengths and weaknesses that can be encountered in the use of this model.

Weber's work made a significant impact on the development in the study of organizations and management. Bureaucracy has been socially

institutionalized and used globally. It is considered by some to be stuffy and
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regimented for example employees taking their breaks at assigned times, dress code specified etc (Daft, 2004, p. 239). However an organization may end up with a term called “ mock bureaucracy “ where the rules are seen as an external regulation that can be ignored on purpose, neither managements nor workers values are aligned with the rules so they are widely regarded as lacking legitimacy; everyone knows the rules and yet decides not to take it seriously, implementing tighter controls may result in resistance and employees become rebels” (Clegg, Kornberger, & Tyrone, 2008, p. 90). The interpretations of the rules have to change in this case and managing organization is less about knowing what the rules are, and more about managing the meaning.

In recent times where the world is taking a more entrepreneurial approach in organization, the Weberian Ideal form of Bureaucracy may not exist in absolute form, because of the changing environment. The need for innovation is very key; an organization may set up a different department for innovation and the other tasks are shared accordingly (Clegg, Kornberger, & Tyrone, 2008, p. 93). Red tape and rigidities, we may say we now live in partly post bureaucratic times where a concern with efficiency predominates over issues of equity and justice. Organizations have become more modern equipments, machines and computers now replace files, a database can be drawn up and important records can also be kept there. In essence bureaucracy cannot be absolutely eliminated in as much as some people detest this model; it exists in organizations in different ways of different units for example in a university it may exist in the admissions department, Exams and records departments and so on. It would be hard to imagine a university

without the consistent application of rules. There are no organizations that do not have some sort of rules after all, and all organizations are (at least partly) bureaucratic.