The Essential Characteristics of Bureaucracies

Although the army, the post office, a college, and General Motors may not seem to have much in common, they are all bureaucracies. As Weber (1947) analyzed them, these are the essential characteristics of a bureaucracy:

1. A hierarchy with assignments flowing downward and accountability flowing upward. The

organization is divided into clear‐cut levels. Each level assigns responsibilities to the

level beneath it, while each lower level is accountable to the level above for fulfilling

those assignments.

2. A division of labor. Each member of a bureaucracy has a specific task to fulfill, and all of

the tasks are then coordinated to accomplish the purpose of the organization. In a

college, for example, a teacher does not run the heating system, the president does not

teach, and a secretary does not evaluate textbooks. These tasks are distributed among

people who have been trained to do them.

3. Written rules. In their attempt to become efficient, bureaucracies stress written

procedures. In general, the longer a bureaucracy exists and the larger it grows, the more

written rules it has. The rules of some bureaucracies cover just about every imaginable

situation. In our university, for example, the rules are bound in handbooks. The guiding

principle generally becomes, “If there isn’t a written rule covering it, it is allowed.”

4. Written communications and records. Records are kept of much of what occurs in a

bureaucracy. (“Fill that out in triplicate.”) Consequently, workers in bureaucracies spend

a fair amount of time sending memos back and forth. They also produce written reports

detailing their activities. An NGO, for example, may require that each employee fill out

quarterly reports summarizing the number of hours per week spent on specified

activities as well as an annual report listing what was accomplished.

5. Impersonality. It is the office that is important, not the individual who holds the office.

You work for the organization, not the replaceable person who heads some post in the

organization. Consequently, members of a bureaucracy owe allegiance to the office, not

to particular people. If you work in a bureaucracy, you become a small cog in a large

machine.