

The Necessity of Work, Method and Procedure in Public Administration

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Abstract: Public administration is a science and as such its activities have to be undertaken according to reputable and reliable work studies, methods and procedures; hence the necessity to study in some details the three concepts. These then constitute the subject of this article.

Keywords: administration, reliability, work study methods and procedures.

I. Introduction

Each of the concepts of work, method and procedure indicates a class of phenomena with so many extremely divergent manifestations that they are definable in only the vaguest of terms. We shall try to define them, however because in Public Administration we must always be quite clear about what we are saying and writing about at all times. The concepts of work, method and procedure are carefully examined in turn as follows:

Work

Alfred Marshall, the classical economist, described work (labour) as ‘...any exertion of mind or body undergone partly or wholly with a view to some good other than the pleasure derived directly from the work.’

Koontz and O’Donnell give a similar definition with some examples:

‘The word “work” ...means the exertion of effort to accomplish something. The effort may be mental or physical, voluntary or forced; the accomplishment may be complete or limited. A farmer visualizes the result of work in terms of specific agricultural products in certain volume and quality; a corporation director, in terms of profit dollars. It is the latter who needs the cooperation of many people, each contributing effort to produce the effect envisioned.

We make a distinction here between effort directed to recreation (which also accomplishes something) and effort directed toward working for a living. The latter must contribute, either directly or indirectly, to the living standard of the worker’.

If we examine our definition of administration where we spoke only of goal, frame of reference and human effort, then we see that the dynamics of administration entails more than ‘work’ as defined above; namely that it includes all that can be interpreted as the actualization of the goal even if this entails certain form of relaxation. In public administration we usually interpret goal realization, or rather whatever results in the realization of the goal, as work. As used in this chapter, therefore, the word work will be interpreted in accordance with Marshall’s definition.

II. Method

In the first study module 1 of the first-year course we elaborated fully on the concept ‘method’ in scientific practice. The definition of ‘method’ formulated there holds for ‘method’ as we use it in this chapter also. Let us recapitulate briefly. We are referring to Stoker’s definition:

In elaborating on this formulation Stoker uses the original Greek meaning of the word method (=hodos = way, path). He asserts that a method implies bipolarity; namely: (a) what is initially available, and (b) the ultimate aim. Between these two poles – the starting place and the finish – the action takes place. And the action between these poles must be such as to link the two poles and yet take into account the nature and possibilities of what is available (starting place) and the stipulated goal (or expected result). *Thus the method of work is determined by both poles.* This working-method is impossible without accurate planning. If the nature and possibilities of what is available are ignored or of results are obtained by chance we cannot say that a method has been employed. *A method is a purposefully devised way of working.*

Obviously, therefore, *we are justified in thinking of a method as a means in Public Administration.* This statement is extremely significant for it means that within the frame of reference of the state, or within any lesser frame of reference we decide on with some aim in view, *public administration can be considered a means*

to an end for which such a frame of reference exists. Public administration as a totality is therefore also a method, a method by which other methods are determined.

III. Procedure

Koontz and O'Donnell define 'procedure' as follows: '*Procedures are plans in that they establish a customary method of handling future activities. They are truly guides to action rather than to thinking, and they detail the exact manner in which a certain activity must be accomplished. Their essence is chronological sequence of required actions*'.

And in an incidental reference to procedures John Millet wrote: '...procedure is the very life-line of administration... The everyday work of persons and groups is geared to certain accustomed routine.... It is procedure... which fixes the standards of acceptable administrative conduct'.

The origin of the word 'procedure' produces nothing special. The Latin root simply means 'proceed', and its present meaning developed later. 'Procedure' was first used mainly to describe the 'work' (steps) in courts of law during trials, but today it is fairly generally used to describe prescribed methods of action. Any attempt to associate the word with a more specific meaning could not be justified, nor is it necessary for our purpose.

What we have learnt so far is that administration is a type of work, that method is a way of working, and that procedure is a prescribed way of working and thus a prescribed method. Now we come to two final questions: firstly, is the prescribed method for the mixing of concrete a procedure? And secondly, how does one distinguish between procedure, step, activity, function, process, technique, way of working, action, operation, conduct, rule, regulation, etc? In answering the first question we may think it odd to speak of concrete mixing as a 'procedure' but if we are to be consistent we have no alternative. We should also like to point out that we usually associate procedure with documents, formal steps in consultations, meetings, etc. This is not our greatest problem however, for the second question is far more difficult to answer. If we intend to make a clear-cut distinction we shall be obliged to use our own dogmatic criteria.

All that we can say is that 'procedure' always implies a plurality of steps/operations and now that we have seen the whole group of closely related words we must be careful not to use the word 'procedure' indiscriminately. We consider the definition of Koontz and O'Donnell an outstanding extension of the concept 'prescribed way of thinking'. The statement of these writers that 'procedure' is a 'type of plan' fits in perfectly with our own concise definition of planning.

Since this chapter is concerned with the determination of working-methods and procedure, it is certainly advisable to explain why both terms, and not only one of them, are used. In the remainder of the chapter we shall confine our attention mainly to procedures. Only the 'suitable' methods and not all determinable methods, will be prescribed; i.e. 'procedure'. We may do something in a certain way – i.e. according to a certain method – which is nevertheless not a procedure.

Now procedure may occur within a procedure. We shall not however make this fine distinction in this chapter. We shall instead confine ourselves to procedure as described by Koontz and O'Donnell and use the singular or plural according to the situation.

Why are procedures necessary in public administration?

Why we must prescribe methods? The simple reason is that we like order and rationality in our work to make it as effective as possible. This general statement can be split into a number of specific 'reasons' for the existence of procedures. To make the discussion complete we shall state them below. Incidentally they will further explain the nature of procedures:

In public management, conduct, operation, decisions, etc, should always be responsible and lawful. This holds regardless of the criteria of accountability and legitimacy, and therefore, regardless of whether we are concerned with a liberal or a communist state. This requirement makes procedure essential because accountability and legitimacy are entailed in procedure. The exaggeration of the necessity for formal procedure in this sense is one of the main causes for what is known as 'red tape'.

In any work situation newcomers need a certain amount of orientation and training. For these the existence of procedures (procedural codes) is an essential aid. In their absence conflicting behaviour may result and incorrect working-methods intrude.

People differ. Their personal aims and assessment of what is 'best' and most important may differ. But within a certain frame of reference they are united by the aims for which that particular frame of reference exists. And since, if they act together and in an orderly way they are better able to realize those aims than if they act otherwise, procedure is necessary.

Obviously division of labour and specialization are features where more than one person pursues the same end in the same framework. In a procedure provision is made for who, what and how of division of labour.

Work of several persons within the same frame of reference and between different frameworks cannot be coordinated without clear-cut procedure. In fact the clearer the procedure is the easier effective coordination.

Work, aims and frames of reference change. New dispensations must be made. Delegation is essential. None of these essential dynamic phenomena are possible without procedure.

In most goal-oriented frames of reference, and particularly in large frames of reference that include smaller ones, we find a hierarchy of personnel and therefore formal communication channels, and this is another thing that makes procedure essential.

Those who have to use the services of public institutions must know who does what and what they themselves must do. Here again procedures are essential. Without procedure it would be impossible to expropriate land, to have a telephone installed, to submit an accident claim, etc.

Factors That Necessitate Reviewing Of Procedures

Introduction

And so we come again to the ever more rapid change in man's life. This necessitates change on procedure. Or, in greater detail, we may say that the following factors cause a demand for constant reviewing and overhauling of procedures.

Factors That Necessitate Reviewing Of Procedures

The Dynamic Nature of the Community

All change is not progress, nor can we dogmatically state what kind of change constitutes progress. Different views on the nature of progress often explain why one group clings to a certain procedure while another wants it altered. Let us accept however, that 'needs' change and that therefore procedures and institutions that provide for public needs have continually to be adapted to them. Accordingly, public institutions should subject their procedures to a critical day-by-day analysis and accommodate themselves to new circumstances.

We should remember that the aim of an institution at any given moment is to provide both for the needs of that moment and for anticipated future needs. In addition, national, provincial, municipal and other public institutions are subject to development and consequently must continually adapt their procedures to changing demands. These demands are both functional and institutional. Functional demands originate in new and changed needs, whereas institutional demands are the result of new knowledge and needs. The rapid development of postal communication, for example, has compelled the Post Office to use different procedures for sorting post. And local governments have had to consolidate their many accounts and automate book-keeping. Furthermore institutional demands also originate in the nature of the institutions created to further the activities of public institutions. For whereas in feudal times for example overlord could himself appoint and control the one or two persons who had to help him with the administration of his estate, the needs of our times have made it impossible for the state president as head of the executive to cope with all personnel matters himself. And over the years it has become necessary to appoint a body to concentrate on the facet of the administration of the activities of the civil service. In South Africa and in the civil service in most other countries this has resulted in the institution of the civil service commission to control personnel matters. Thus our Civil Service Commission owes its existence to an institutional need that has developed in the normal course of affairs. A similar development accounts for the institution of municipal service commissions in bigger local governments.

Undeniably, the history of our own public sector shows that functional and institutional demands has developed since the South Africa civil service was created in 1910 and that period reorganization and adaption has been necessary. The various commissions of investigation – e.g. the Graham and the Centilevers commissions to mention only two of the most important – are examples of the need for periodic investigation into existing organization and procedures. The many commissions and committees at the municipal level are already a general feature. Public management is a process that changes continually. Existing procedures must therefore be continually investigated with a view to their possible adaptation to changed circumstances.

Technological Inventions

From earliest times technological inventions have been one of the main reasons for the adjustments of procedures. We could cite many examples of the important part played by technological inventions in social activities and of the rejection of old and firmly-rooted regulations and procedures to make way for modern and better regulations and procedures.

This holds good for more or less every department and institutions serving the community. New technological inventions, many of which are labour-serving, are being introduced almost continually into one government department or another. When this happens the whole institutions and the procedures followed must be adapted to the new circumstances. A good example of this is the introduction of electronic computers since

World War II. As these have been installed to do work previously done by human beings, reorganization and adaptation of procedures has become essential.

New Administrative Instruments And Techniques

Comparable with the invention of new technological devices is the way in which new 'instruments' in the sense of improved procedures and techniques have been discovered in public administration, and in fact in administration in general. These have influenced the administrative process to such an extent that the existing institutions have had to be reorganized.

From time immemorial man has had a natural urge to make things easier for himself. Owing to this inherent desire for greater comfort for himself and his fellow men he has on occasion adapted nature to his needs. Similarly, in his constant effort to facilitate his daily task he organizes his work and applies new procedures. Today, with the chronic shortage of adequate and suitable manpower, increasing efforts are being made to discover shorter and more efficient procedures to enable the same volume of work to be done by a smaller number of workers. Experts are therefore given the responsibility of examining existing procedures with a view to devising possible improvements.

The Tendency To Overlap In Government Institutions

Overlapping is an old problem in administration. As we said before it is virtually impossible for the legislature to go into detail when passing legislation, and if a new body is to be established, the legislature merely indicates its main functions. As the needs of the community increase however it becomes necessary to expand the existing institutions and establish others, each to provide for the needs of the community in its own particular sphere. Often their functions are so closely related that two separate institutions begin to operate in the same field, thus creating the problem of overlapping. This is often a direct result of a human tendency to 'empire build'. In empire building each department tries in its own interest to appropriate as many government activities as can possibly be thought to fall within its domain. To prevent overlapping as far as possible the functions of government institutions must be regularly examined.

Summary On Determination Of Methods And Procedures

The scope and complexity of modern public services place a very heavy burden on senior administrators. Knowledge and skills developed and refined in a vast number of specialized fields of study are available to facilitate the optimal use and then satisfactory realization of resources. Public administrators must be acquainted with the potential and relative costs of available specialties which could be employed to improve over-all performance and which could even contribute to better identification and operational formulation of values. The importance of the role of the administrator increases in direct proportion to the increase in specialization. Should administrators fail to appreciate this fundamental fact they will fail, leaving their institutions exposed to the dysfunctionality of uncoordinated specialization.

The subjects discussed in this chapter are altogether too expensive for detailed discussion here. Furthermore, we find ourselves in a field where it is difficult to decide definitely whether or not we are in the sphere of public administration. The least we can say is that the subjects concerned should not be altogether unknown to the public administrator.

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