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Exploring the Bureaucratic Demon

by Tricia Jack and Ken Embley, CPPA

by Tricia Jack:

I recently discovered a computer game called "Bureaucracy," where the player changes address and confronts a series of resulting bureaucratic challenges. The game has a level of "blood pressure" which rises and falls with the level of frustration, and when a certain level is reached, an aneurysm occurs. This is where the game ends.

As a citizen of the U.K. and former Training and Development Manager with the Scottish Court Service, I have experienced bureaucracy both internally and externally. Heaven forbid, I might even have been referred to as a "bureaucrat." Whether it was the driver license agency, property tax department or the Office of the Registrar, it was never a fun experience to deal with government agencies back home. Worse still, as a government employee, I never thought about how my actions could be bureaucratic.



When I first arrived in the U.S. from Scotland, I hoped for better things. I was disappointed. My early experiences here were typical of interventions with large government organizations. Not that the service was "bad;" it just wasn't "good." It was tied up with red tape and frustration; long lines and inefficiencies. Within a few days, I realized that bureaucracy is bureaucracy *wherever* you are in the world! As a new MPA student, I got to thinking, "why do we have this crazy inefficient system?", "what purpose does it really serve?", and "is there a better way?"

Like most others, I understand the need for structure in organizations, and I accept the necessity of policies and procedures, but when the structure gets in the way of providing a service, something is seriously wrong. To innocent bystanders, layer upon layer of management can make a simple task impossible. Bureaucracy can lead to people being treated as "objects," where their needs are not individually addressed because the "system" doesn't work for them, or even works *against* them. It can lead to a rigidity of procedures, where individuals are displaced in favor of standard procedures, making "different" cases seem impossible to handle. It can lead to people working in silos and not being able to see the "bigger picture." It can lead to a lack of communication between teams, making organizations seem inefficient and prone to "passing the buck." Bureaucrats can hide behind these systems and procedures and can easily avoid responsibility for their work by becoming anonymous.

What kind of game do you play?

by Ken Embley:

My colleague scores points with her observations about bureaucracy and related demons. I think most citizens can conjure up stories about these demons and it seems quite natural to blame bureaucracy in a manner similar to that found in my colleague's comments. The implication is that bureaucracy is to blame, and bureaucracy is not much more than fertile ground for inefficiency and poor service. However, I believe citizen frustrations have little to do

with bureaucracy and a whole lot to do with the failures of the quality of management found within the bureaucracy.

Max Weber (1864-1920) developed the bureaucratic model as a rational method of structuring complex organizations. Weber sought to define an ideal system where positions are well defined, divisions of labor are clear, objectives are explicit, and there is a clear chain of authority.

Frankly, I find little in the *concepts* of bureaucracy to warrant complaint. To me, bureaucracy is a management tool and like all tools, in the hands of a master artisan, the means to amazing works. Figuratively speaking, I believe Max Weber can be a proud father of bureaucracy—a sound management tool that just happens to have a bad reputation due in part to some who lack management skill.

I hope the kind of game we choose to play is one where managers will hold themselves accountable to the highest standards of quality and excellence in government. I believe where a citizen finds excellence in government the citizen will also find excellent management. I believe where a citizen finds excellence in government, bureaucracy becomes nothing more than a management tool in the hands of a master manager.

Postscript: Tricia has worked with CPPA since 2005, but is a recent addition to the Outreach Team. Watch out for more of her thoughts in this column in future issues of *Policy Perspectives*.

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