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The BS Attitudes

How Things Work in Bureaucracies



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As anybody who has ever dealt with a large bureaucracy can tell you, there is some behavior that tends to be common to all such organizations. The pervasiveness of this behavior is such that one could almost believe that there is some hidden set of rules beyond all the corporate regulations, laws of whatever jurisdiction, or any other obvious set of precepts or guidance. It is as if deep in some musty catacomb, meetings of some strange sect are held to reveal the arcane secrets held in an ancient scroll containing the rules governing the actions of all bureaucracies. These rules would govern the actions of bureaucracies without those organizations even being aware of their true guiding principles. Of course, such a musty scroll filled with mystical runes does not exist. If it did, though, the following might be the ten sacred rules of How Things Work in Bureaucracies. With apologies to those of a religious bent, let's call these

THE BS ATTITUDES:

They are presented here with a small amount of further exposition following each.

(1) Blessed is our <office, group, organization, company - choose as appropriate>, for we are the center of the universe.

As the great Chicago bar band "Off Broadway usa" sang, "If the world revolved around you, we would try to escape to Mars . . ." Yet it is human nature to focus on one's own interests, environment, and convenience when forming opinions, making policies, and setting up procedures. This does not lead to the best solutions, however. How many times have you dealt with a form, process, or design that made life miserable for everybody but the small corner of the bureaucracy which originated it? Remember how they reacted to any complaints? Remember how they seemed to consider anything other than their own concerns to be trivial? Now, think about the last such interaction when somebody came to you and try to picture it from his or her side. Is the thought embarrassing, perhaps?

(2) Blessed are those who tolerate the customers, for it is good to be kind to lower forms of life.

If the rest of the bureaucracy or even peers in the industry are viewed as minor planets revolving around the sun of the bureaucratic ego, then customers are usually analogized to space debris. Most bureaucracies eventually evolve into a mind-set which views customers as persons who should be grateful to be granted a moment's attention in a busy bureaucratic schedule where they may genuflect, kiss the appropriate rings, and plead their pitiful case before the exalted ones. It's sort of an odd attitude, given the fact that

without customers, one definitely doesn't have a business, and even a nonprofit or governmental bureaucracy should find it hard to justify an existence based on contemplating its own corporate navel.

(3) Blessed are those who build empires and kingdoms, for they shall get ahead.

Yet another trait of bureaucracy run amok is the tendency to pit one part of the organization against the others for resources, power, and prestige. It is normal and efficient for there to be resource allocations, but it seems that once an organization reaches a certain point, it is large enough to support a great deal of inefficiency and still survive. To analogize, if your liver suddenly decided to make a play for superiority by annexing your left kidney and both lungs, you would not survive long. On the other hand, if one of those giant fungus networks that cover thousands of acres, or perhaps a large coral reef, had sections which went berserk in similar fashion, the larger entity could probably carry on for quite some time before the damage doomed the entire organism or community of organisms. The net result is that there is no quick natural inhibitor to such unproductive or potentially destructive behavior. The person or group which goes power mad tends to get the desired results for quite some time. The longer it continues, the harder it is to root out the problem, since others see the personal benefit and begin to emulate the behavior. The only saving grace is that when multiple individuals or organizations within the bureaucracy develop this problem, they tend to keep each other somewhat in check with truly creative infighting.

(4) Blessed are those who are inefficient, for large budgets and organizations are a sign of honor.

This aspect of bureaucratic bloat is directly tied to the previous one. Once somebody goes in for personal or organizational self-aggrandizement, the usual way of keeping score is either dollars of budget or numbers of people. This tends to create an atmosphere where efficiency is not a prime concern. Once a particular function has been expanded as far as it can go, the only other options are to annex other functions or to keep doing the same thing. If the former is not possible, there is little incentive to become more efficient. After all, if you do the same job with fewer people or resources, it's no longer as large and glamorous a pond to be the big frog in, is it?

(5) Blessed are those who spend all their budget, for they shall get more.

The simplest method of budgeting is to take the previous budget and apply some delta factor to it. This is a very popular method, as it does not require any extensive analysis or painful self-examination, let alone any observation of, and response to, outside influences. Why take the introduction of the automobile into account in one's buggy-whip sales projections if you don't have to? In such a simple scheme one major rule of thumb is that if N dollars were spent on something last year, you probably should allocate at least that much this year. Of course, this creates a problem for the organization or individual whose actual needs fluctuate from year to year. The bureaucratic answer? Never admit to those low-need years – it will only bring you grief.

(6) Blessed are those who optimize locally, for there is no glory in making the whole system work better.

The problem that most bureaucracies have in this regard is that each individual or group wishes to be perceived as being above average. The best way to do so is to make sure that enough other people are below average. Thus, difficult or unpleasant tasks are farmed out to others, and if somebody else does something that makes one's own job simpler, the standard procedure is to hide that fact as well as possible, then claim the improvement is due to one's own wonderfulness. The interesting thing is that on the one hand, large budgets and staffs are a sign of prestige, but the "appearance" of efficiency often needs to be maintained. The end result is often a sort of internal corporate bulimia where vast consumption is trumpeted on one front while touting one's trim organizational appearance using other measures.

(7) Blessed are those who elevate those like unto themselves, for their likeness shall endure forever.

This is a reflection of the fact that the personality type that most needs to be perpetuated is the one most likely to be comfortable with the grooming and advancement of those who are dissimilar. Meanwhile, the more bureaucratically problematic managers are out looking for either a reflection of themselves or a cheering section. Think of Stalin, Chairman Mao, or any other "cult of personality-type" leader. In bureaucratic genetics, reasonableness tends to be a recessive gene, while egotism and idiocy are dominant traits that seem to spread rapidly through an evolving population by a process of unnatural selection.

(8) Blessed are those who overpromise, for immediate glory will be theirs and their transgressions will not be discovered until they are safely off the project.

Since bureaucracies tend to view "long-term projections" as involving what's happening next week, and learning from history is often limited to not having the same lunch one had yesterday, one can usually get away with milking any situation for even more than what it is worth and then bailing out before things get ugly. Those who develop this to an art form tend to advance rapidly, and it is not in their interest to institute any sort of policy of long-term responsibility once they reach a level where they could do so. There will always be those who stick it out until the end trying to do a good job, or at least trying to avert total disaster. Hopefully, these conscientious folks will be rewarded in the afterlife, since the "grab the glory and run" folks almost always win in the typical bureaucracy.

(9) Blessed are those who cover their posterior, for they shall come to no harm.

While endemic in bureaucracies, this is also a growing societal trend. No matter what is wrong in our lives, there is surely somebody else to take the risk or the blame, and our own responsibility for anything other than success is viewed as minimal. Even if we privately acknowledge our responsibility, it is never to be admitted publicly, unless there is a guarantee of sympathy or reward. See any story about athletes or celebrities

admitting substance abuse or antisocial behavior for further reference on that technique. The missing concept is the bureaucratically unacceptable notion that anything worth doing will probably involve at least some failure as part of the learning process. In the virtual unreality of a bureaucracy, the preferred options are to make sure somebody else does the failing, or to elegantly explain why it looks like a failure, sounds like a failure, but is actually a brilliant advance in an unexpected direction.

(10) Blessed are those who bide their time in the midst of buzzwords, for eventually the game will return to normal.

The concept of inertia tells us (loosely translated) that things at rest tend to stay at rest, and things in motion will stay in motion on the same trajectory unless acted on by a force. Also, the bigger the thing, the larger the force needed to change its motion or direction. Bureaucracies tend to be huge. Further derivation is left to the reader.

So where does this leave us?

How can anyone overcome something so embedded in human nature and near-religious dogma? Probably the same way that all such large-scale behavior changes occur. One must present the benefits, constantly strive to spread the new vision, and lastly, sum up the new philosophy in a similarly terse set of easy to remember guidelines that can be included in a million-selling self-help book. So, in an attempt to begin the change, I present for your consideration a set of basic tenets to counter the old conventional practices. I refuse to refer to the above as "conventional wisdom," since while it may be "conventional," it still fails to meet the other half of the prerequisites for the use of that term.

Unlike the prior ten, the following guidelines are presented as admonitions to the individual. The reasoning is that bureaucracies are seldom converted all at once, and it is unlikely they will ever be fully converted. Thus, it is up to each individual to decide that he or she will personally begin to exhibit different behavior. Who knows? If we all try to change our little corner, in the long term, the total effect might be substantial.

(1) Thou shalt tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth in all thy interactions, lest thou deceive by an act of commission or omission.

Nobody likes to be lied to. In an organization, the impact is even worse, in that not only is there the need to deal with bad feelings when the deception comes to light, but there is also the impact of all the decisions made on the basis of the faulty information. While it is impossible to strictly follow this rule without hurting feelings or telling people things they have no need to know, it still should be a guiding principle. Any time one is consciously deceiving a colleague, a customer, or even one's self, it is usually not ultimately an appropriate action. An atmosphere of implicit trust allows far more synergy and mutual benefit than one founded on doubt or deception.

(2) Thou shalt attempt to estimate thy capabilities and obligations as accurately as possible, and when in doubt, underpromise and overdeliver.

This follows closely on the heels of number one. In any endeavor, the only way that progress can be made toward a goal is through using accurate data. Promising things which cannot be delivered is a short-term strategy. The truth will eventually come out. Implicit in this tenet is the assumption that one will also strive to learn more so one can refine one's understanding, improve the estimation process, and assess the effectiveness of one's methods of following through on the estimate.

(3) Thou shalt push the limits where possible, but always be aware of them and acknowledge them, for the laws of nature, physics, and the state are not going to change just because thou declarest it to be so.

The key here is to have a solid understanding of what you know, what you don't know, and what you are assuming. Often the things we accept as being impossible were, in fact, beyond our capability at one time but have since moved into the realm of possibility. The flip side is that one needs to avoid being overly enthusiastic when declaring things possible. Reexamining one's assumptions periodically is generally a good idea and may help prevent arbitrary decisions or assumptions from becoming permanently embedded in corporate culture or personal behavior with no logical basis.

(4) Thou shalt know when to say no, for thy integrity is not to be sacrificed to meet the expectations of others.

Most people and organizations are faced at some point with a situation that calls for them to sign up to do things that are against their personal or corporate ideals, or that will require them to lower their standards, or will deliver results to their customer which they know to be against the customer's best interests, or are simply beyond their capabilities, for either resource or skill reasons. In these cases it is important to make clear exactly what can be done. If the feasible options are not acceptable to the customer, we need to just say no. It benefits nobody to bend to pressure when unacceptable end results can be clearly predicted.

(5) Thou shalt optimize globally, even if it results in somebody else looking good, for we are all on the same side, and we can win together.

R. Buckminster Fuller once observed that most wars and difficulties in the world are a result of squabbles over who gets the bigger piece of the pie, when we could instead be working together and making the pie bigger for everybody. This principle applies to individuals and organizations equally well. In the end, the effects of synergy and combined effort will almost always result in a better outcome for everybody than a shortsighted pursuit of individual or localized benefit. We can all gain by focusing on the long term over the short term and on the common good over more focussed gain.

(6) Thou shalt always treat customers, colleagues, the problem at hand, and yourself with the respect each is due.

Customers and colleagues are deserving of respect simply for being human. We need to remember that they are not some faceless entity or supporting players in the movie of our own life. They are people and should be respected. We often forget that rule also applies to ourselves, and we fail to give ourselves proper respect. This is not always easy, though, and many people tend to wildly over- or underestimate their own importance. The task at hand should be respected for safety reasons, and so that the appropriate effort is put toward it. Despite our tendency to glamorize some tasks and to look down on others, any job done conscientiously has value. There are almost no unworthy tasks, provided the task is not to an immoral purpose. Instead, the problem is usually one of unworthy efforts applied to honorable tasks.

(7) Thou shalt take calculated risks and be creative, for thou shalt make no progress by being timid.

How many opportunities go by every day for trying something new? When's the last time that you took a different route to work? How often do we learn one way of doing something or a subset of a tool's possible uses, and stick with it rather than try other ways? Serendipity and discovery are wonderfully powerful tools in all areas of our lives, yet they are seldom used. Perhaps we need to get in the habit of trying one new thing each day, just to get ourselves in practice for being creative. Learn from a two-year old and start asking "Why?" more often. Start focusing more on the things you have not been forbidden to do, instead of limiting yourself to those things you have been explicitly told you may do.

(8) Thou shalt accept occasional failure in thyself and in others, for it is a sign of growth and an opportunity for learning.

The only way to find your limits is to push against them. When one does so, occasional failures or unexpected results will happen. If there is no irreparable harm done, and one can learn something of value from the process, why should we be afraid of this? This is not a call to be foolhardy but rather a challenge to operate closer to your full potential. If you hold back to maintain a large margin of safety, you will likely lead a life which is serene, calm, and utterly boring. Why not expand the boundaries a bit instead? And just as you hope that your friends, colleagues, and customers will be supportive in your moments of failure, you should also be understanding and helpful when they meet with failure. If we all strive to learn from the experience, we can all move forward together.

(9) Thou shalt strive to make things better, for the status quo is seldom as good as it could be.

If everything were perfect, you would not be reading this. After all, why would you need any ideas on how to improve things? Given that we accept that things can get better, what possible reason is there for accepting things as they are? I can think of only two – things might get worse if we change, or the effort involved in making things better isn't worth it. Either could be true, but most likely the real reason is that we are comfortable

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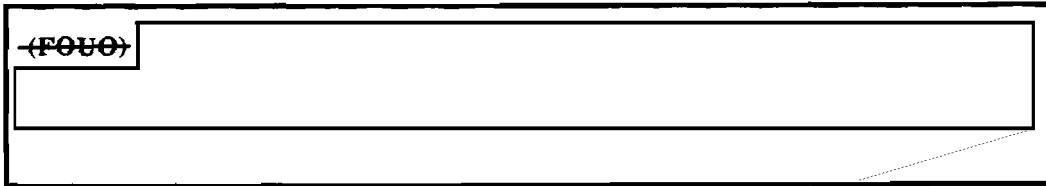
with the familiar. The trick is to find those parts of the familiar that could be better and gradually work on making it so. You will often meet some resistance along the way, but if you persevere, eventually the new, better conditions will become the familiar, accepted way for things to be. You will have made a lasting change for the better.

(10) Thou shalt not take thyself too seriously, for life is short and thou shouldst enjoy at least some of it.

Laugh a little. Try to spend more of your time on things you enjoy, even at work. If your work is not enjoyable at least some of the time, consider finding work that is. Don't worry about if the glass is half empty or half full, just refill it! Don't just stop to smell the roses, plant some for the next guy and give your friends a bud or two.

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It should be noted that the author is himself woefully deficient in following his own rules, but he is trying to improve. . . .



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