

Summer 8-13-2013

# Our Universities: Bureaucracy and Morality

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## Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V. "Our Universities: Bureaucracy and Morality." (Summer 2013).

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## Our Universities: Bureaucracy and Morality

Bureaucracies create and sustain a moral perspective.

*“If you are going to sin, sin against God, not the bureaucracy. God will forgive you but the bureaucracy won’t.”*

Hyman Rickover

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Effective bureaucracies — vision directed guidelines and processes — are flywheels reducing vibration in an organization by tempering irregularity and providing consistency and rhythm. They are exceedingly rare. Typically, and unfortunately, bureaucracies do little of value to focus on first purpose. Inevitably they become twisted first purpose and live outside the watch, like a wicked watchmaker. Any human organization that aspires to purpose and excellence via regularity of process alone cannot do so. It is lost.

Max Weber, a German sociologist whose ideas flourished in the 1930’s and 40’s, identified key principles of good government: 1) formal structure, 2) management by rules, 3) fixed division of labor, 4) equity based treatment of employees and customers, 5) success determined by technical qualifications, 6) all knotted together by a propensity to enlarge. Number six, added by C. Northcott Parkinson as a criticism, became known as “Parkinson’s Law.”

Douglas J. Amy, a professor of politics at Mount Holyoke College, argues that bureaucracy is government and therefore it’s good in a stunningly simplistic story called **“Government Is Good.”** He tries to break myths such as bureaucracies are wasteful, government should be a business, bureaucracies cause government growth, and bureaucracies provide poor service. Visit the Department of Motor Vehicles in New York or California to see how far out in left field Amy is. Although intricately woven, Amy’s and Weber’s “bureaucracies-are-good” or create “good” are still nonsense, whether caring for the sick, educating the young, or selling nuts and bolts.

Robert Jackall’s *“Moral Mazes: Bureaucracy and Managerial Work”*, in the **Harvard Business Review**, 1983, suggests that managers create a morality in an organization by day-to-day actions — habit. My friend used to have a sign in his office, “Make order and cleanliness a habit.” Process becomes all and it’s hard to argue against fair processes. But vital opportunity is leadership-driven through predictable behavior. If “Weber’s Web” takes over rules govern, not people. And this road to nowhere is paved with good intentions. This visionless path spawned by rationality and procedural perfection, guided by management processes rather than ideas and passion, is full of potholes.

The real work of any organization of two or more people, public or private, should be excellence through the attainment of a vision guided mission. However, bureaucracies are sanitized from any guiding perspective working under the assumption that because different moralities exist in pluralistic organizations, it is preferred that the organization have no perspective at all, moral or otherwise.

Teamwork and thoughtful mission directed processes shouldn't be confused with bureaucracy. Teamwork is essential, bureaucracy is crippling. But fair processes are vital: Don't choke this idea for its seemingly autocratic tendencies. Kevin Williamson in ***National Review Online*** argued last week that damning autocracy exists in bureaucracies upheld by rules established by committees. Worse yet, nobody, not even leadership, appears responsible...just good managers following democratically determined processes and rules. That should be Mr. Weber's first law, make everyone responsible for nothing. Such organizations claim to embrace "*Management Morality*" as a means to equity and fairness.

Managerial plebiscites are disingenuous and rudderless. Indeed, the best ideas frequently well-up from the ground, not dribbling down from on-high. Bureaucracies bent on a rule-driven aversion to risk create listlessness. Organizational morality hates intelligence apart from process. The morality of the bureaucracy is not wedded to the functional goal of excellence but procedural machination elevated to a perverse art-form of jots and tittles.

Initiative is replaced by the caprice of mindless obedience. Willful compliance based on a commitment to cause beyond process is invaluable, but mindless conformity to anything is worthless and suffocating. This, for many organizations, is the operational morality paralyzing human initiative, commitment to high purpose, and progress that provides for liberty and achievement.

Our universities are too frequently bedeviled by the seemingly benevolent belief that procedural rationality creates quality. Sorry, it won't. Bureaucracy birthed moral perspective should be checked at the front door: It devastates everything a university, or any human organization, should strive for.