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What Price Administrative Perfection?

PROFOUND CHANGES are occurring in the administration of all kinds of public and private institutions including agricultural research organizations. Some of the reasons for these changes include increases in the size and complexity of these institutions and the demand for more direction and control over their activities by those who provide financial support. There is also a major tendency to use modern principles of management, particularly quantitative methodology to make the decision-making process more rational. All this has resulted in an explosive growth of administration and in greater administrative demands and restrictions on the people who do the productive work of the organization. In short, we are slowly and surely bureaucratizing our research and educational institutions.

No doubt the overall efficiency of administration has improved (by bureaucratic standards) as a result of this process; however, the important consideration is what effect it is having on the real purpose of a research organization: creativity, as measured by the number and quality of new ideas generated. All other activities, including management, must reinforce this goal.

The productive unit in a research organization is the scholar-researcher. What are the factors that enhance his creativity?

Psychologist Ann Roe in a study of successful researchers concluded that a dominant characteristic of an outstanding scientist is "fierce independence" and found that the most important factor in making a scientist is "need and ability to develop personal independence to a high degree." Beveridge points to "enterprise, initiative, ingenuity, a certain dissatisfaction with well-known territory and prevailing ideas and an eagerness to try his own judgment" as attributes required for success in research.

Administrators should therefore foster independence, unconventionality, the abil-

ity to strike out on one's own, and individualism. These characteristics are largely incompatible with today's administrative procedures which direct, confine, control, and enforce conformity; or make individual effort yield to the demands of the organization.

Most modern management techniques are centralized—that is, they are oriented towards improving the quality of decisions made by a few individuals at the apex of a hierarchy. Implicit in these techniques is the assumption that someone other than the researcher (such as the director, his task forces, or advisory councils) knows more about what research should be conducted and how it should be done than the man on the firing line—the researcher.

The new techniques also tend to institutionalize all kinds of activities that otherwise would be directed by the needs of the researcher. Personnel decisions often follow the manual rather than the needs of the researcher. Purchasing procedures are directed by function-oriented policy—not by the individual needs of a creative person. Security decides what hours a scientist and his technicians can work—not the demands of an unpredictable series of experiments. Building standards determine the size and general nature of the laboratory—not the requirements of the research to be conducted. These items are minor when taken individually and are realities that most researchers can adjust to if necessary.

The real question, however, is what purpose do such institutionalized management techniques really serve? Haven't we confused our priorities? The creation of new knowledge—not the control of people—is the real purpose of the institution. The costs in creativity to research laboratories that are highly bureaucratized have been determined and they are very, very high. Can our agricultural research organizations afford to ignore them as we blithely and somewhat naively embrace the new management scientism? I think not.