

Bureaucracy (Weber)

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Max Weber was a sociologist and historian who wrote about the emergence of bureaucracy from more traditional organizational forms (such as feudalism) and its rising pre-eminence in modern society. Scott defines bureaucracy as “the existence of a specialized administrative staff.”

According to Weber, bureaucracy is a particular type of administrative structure developed through rational-legal authority. Bureaucratic structures evolved from traditional structures with the following key changes:

- Jurisdictional areas are clearly specified; activities are distributed as official duties (unlike traditional forms where duties are delegated by the leader and can be changed at any time).
- Organization follows a hierarchical principle -- subordinates follow orders of superiors but have the right of appeal (in contrast to the more diffuse structure in traditional authority).
- Intentional, abstract rules govern decisions and actions. Rules are stable, exhaustive, and can be learned. Decisions are recorded in permanent files (in contrast to traditional forms, which have few explicit rules or written records).
- Means of production or administration belong to the office. Personal property is separated from office property.
- Officials are selected on the basis of technical qualifications, appointed (not elected), and compensated by salary.
- Employment by the organization is a career. The official is a full-time employee and looks forward to a lifelong career. After a trial period, they receive tenure of position and are protected from arbitrary dismissal.

Weber argued that bureaucracy resolves some of the shortcomings of traditional systems. The description above represents his ideal-type construct—a simplified model (not necessarily a preferred one) that highlights the most essential features.

Weber viewed bureaucracy as a system of power in which leaders exercise control over others -- a system based on discipline.

Weber stressed that the rational-legal form was the most stable system for both superiors and subordinates: it is more reliable and clearer yet allows subordinates greater independence and discretion. Ideally, subordinates can challenge the decisions of their leaders by referring to the stated rules, making charisma less important. As a result, bureaucratic systems can handle more complex operations than traditional systems (Scott 2003).

Bureaucracy and Unresponsiveness

Public service organizations are often criticized for being unresponsive to their customers' needs.

One of Weber's most serious concerns was how society would maintain control over expanding state bureaucracies. He believed the most serious problem was not inefficiency or mismanagement, but rather the increased power of public officials. A person in an

important, specialized position comes to realize how dependent their bosses are on their expertise and begins to exercise power accordingly. Furthermore, staff members also begin to associate with the special social interests of their particular group or organization. Over time, this has caused a shift in power from societal leaders to bureaucrats.

Criticisms of Weberian Bureaucratic Theory

There have been numerous criticisms of Weber's theories over the years.

One critique concerns Weber's claim that bureaucratic organizations are based on rational-legal authority. Parsons (1947) and Gouldner (1954) note that Weber stated authority rests both in the "legal incumbency of office" and on "technical competence." This works if superiors have more knowledge and skill, but often this is not the case.

Thompson (1961) points out that in modern organizations, authority is centralized but ability is decentralized. In fact, staff-line distinctions appear to be a structural resolution of this authority-ability dilemma that Weber overlooked.

Weber also does not clearly distinguish between definitions and propositions in his model; his list of distinguishing characteristics is interconnected.

Udy (1959) examined 150 organizations and found no correlation between the bureaucratic attributes of the organization and its rational attributes.

More recent theorists argue that earlier scholars misread Weber and distorted his views. Weber was defining a formal rationality that was not necessarily optimal for efficiency. He recognized that formalization could degenerate into formalism, and that bureaucratic forms concentrated power at the top and could create an "iron cage" that imprisons low-level workers in obscurity and monotonous detail.

References

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