

Strategy of Administrative Reform *
by Masood Hasan

Those organisations come out on top which, instead of being forced to do things, anticipate what is required to be done. In order to forecast intelligently there must be a plan. For the plan to remain effective it must have built-in features for reacting beneficially and quickly to any change in circumstances. In order to ensure that the reaction time does not take till eternity we must have an information network base that is predictable and this can only come through systematization of procedures governing the flow of work. Of course, procedural changes must be made according to some all-embracing strategy. Otherwise there can be no assurance that changes made with the best of intentions do not come into conflict with each other. It is up to us to be aware of such conflicts and work towards their elimination. In the last decade ways and means have been developed to do precisely this. Are we going to miss the boat again?

WE read now, with increasing frequency, of ways and means being adopted to increase the operational efficiencies of organisations, both governmental and semi-autonomous. It appears that the classic way of removing bottlenecks is being resorted to. Ad hoc committees are formed, many of whose members have plenty of other work to do. We then sit back and expect the miracle to happen. If we give some thought to these happenings it is possible to visualize improvements (streamlining) on two counts. The first is short-term and the second long-range.

Improvements initiated by "ad hoc" committees whilst reducing surplus fat very quickly, somehow over a period of time, lay the basis for more sophisticated muddles. We have seen this happen many times. Why does history repeat itself? Without answering that question it may be more enlightening to spend time on understanding the thought processes of ad hoc committeeism.

LOYALTIES

Such committees are made up of representatives each of whom looks after a certain interest. Their loyalties, therefore, are primarily linked to a perpetuation of their particular point of view. There is nothing basically wrong with this state of affairs so far. But because the birth of the committee is illegitimate the conclusions arrived at are looked at in the same fashion as a child born out of wedlock. We must find some way (and such ways do exist) to regularize (formalize) such liaison so as to confer a good name to the results of such get-togethers (committee-wise). This implies that the processes evolved and used by such committees in arriving at whatever conclusions they do must be formalized (systematized) ie be given permanency, hence predictability.

At this stage the "seasoned" administrator will wag his head in disapproval. For does it not mean altering the status quo? Well what do we want—the status quo or a solution of the problem? And if a committee arrives at certain conclusions/recommendations after due deliberation, it follows that the output of such committees must be imposed on the

* Pakistan Times, May 07 1969

existing system in such a way that the new way of doing things does not get submerged in personal or departmental "obfuscations". But this must happen because no one has created a strategy to ensure that the old (system) accepts the new way of doing things without upsetting the applecart.

Now, consider not one ad hoc committee but several. Consider their membership by the dozens. Consider the duplication and, of course, the contradictions. Consider why the results of ad hoc committees set up years ago require more ad hoc committees today. And if this be the shape of things to come we will be laying the foundation for yet more ad hoc committees tomorrow, to unravel what we are now trying to do on account of what happened in the not too distant past. As an Englishman put it, "The pages of history are strewn with the skeletons of nations and organisations who perished because a new generation had been content to rely upon the privileged position earned by an earlier generation".

Our present efforts towards decentralization paradoxically enough are attempts to achieve the advantages inherent in centralized control. If developments of the last 10 years were to be effectively insulated from us in a large black box and then ad hoc decentralization which is forced upon us, ie not done according to some earlier plan, it could be the answer. But developments both in organisation theory (science) and its application (in the form of information technology in practice) during the last decade make possible for us to achieve all the advantages of decentralization (by decentralizing) and yet create a firm centralized control. Can we not acquire the knowledge through deliberative thought to comprehend what this is all about? Of course, we can, but each one of us must do his home work himself. It is only this way that Murphy's Law ie "if anything can go wrong, it will," can be contained within controllable dimensions.

It is necessary to stir ourselves to action. Do we not recognize that laws are not solely the concern of law-makers or religion the concern of theologians or science the concern of the scientists? In the same way improving the operational efficiencies of our institutions concerns all of us.

In order to ensure permanency of the process of doing things better, whether it be in planning or evaluation or control, arrived at committee-wise or otherwise. Let us try to find out what "others" have done when faced with problems of the same kind. The lessons are there for us to learn and we must capitalize on the late-comer's advantage of avoiding glaring errors made elsewhere in this effort to increase productivity. A plan to do something is out of date, many times, by the time it is propounded. This happens at all levels: the personal, the family, the village, the town, the district, the divisional and the national level. If our plans are to be truly meaningful they should have created a formal process wherein changes that occur from what was projected, are fed back and the requisite modifications made in keeping with changing conditions. Then we will have truly achieved a good objective because ad hoc committeeism will be on the downgrade.

To arrive at such a desirable state of affairs calls for:

1. Challenging (scientifically, ie objectively) the existing way of doing things.
2. Clearly defined strategic objectives. This will ensure that any fat pruning will be of permanent value.
3. An understanding that technological progress does not come ready packaged in a crate and all we have to do is to unpack it, set up the machine and put it into operation. It requires something much deeper than just purchasing or borrowing to put technology to productive use.
4. An understanding that the so-called technology gap is an exploded myth. What is missing is the proper attitude towards work so as to achieve our objective of higher and higher operational efficiencies.
5. Cutting across (traditional organizational boundaries (inter and intra-organisation) in an effort to solve a problem. This must be introduced formally.
6. Disciplining ourselves, but not aimlessly; for discipline without imagination is sterile (of course imagination without discipline is chaos!)
7. Taking a good and hard look at how the “developed” countries have increased their productivity. We will come up against the increasingly “unfamiliar situation of those in authority who have been “at it” for some 20-25 years or even more, having to come to terms at an even level, with those who have only 6-7 years experience to their credit. This is because present day management training develops better skills for decision making in a comparatively shorter time.
8. Recognising that Education for development of the character and mental powers and training to bring to a desired state or standard of efficiency—through instruction and practice, is a continuous process. This involves planning and the making of continual adjustments. This can be done by making use of logically well thought out lines for moving information for purposes of co-ordination, leading up to effective control.

Let us not forget that in our effort to forge ahead we are trying to model the type of institutions that have been developed in the West. The examples are legion, whether we look at our defence establishments or semi-autonomous bodies or Government departments or private organisations. It follows directly, therefore, that we must make a study of the ways and means developed for co-ordination (facilitating control) in the West. This understanding will bring home in quick time, firstly, that we do not have to go through the same error committing schedule, and, secondly, that most of the instruments of control are not based on tradition ie they have no past history for us to savour and mull over at our convenience. In other words we are forced to do our own thinking by ourselves. Time and distance have lost their meaning and on many occasions we find that by the time we have decided to adjust ourselves to a particular change we are faced with a new change. And the pace is accelerating.

This also means we have to learn to experiment. As President Kennedy once said, “There is no way to maintain the frontiers of freedom without cost and commitment and risk.”

Progress, as we know of it today, must generate controversy; conflict must be accepted as a way of life. So many times it happens that those disagreeing with one another find, on definition of terms, that they have, in fact, been in agreement all the time. Beware the situation where all is agreement to begin with! There is nothing odd about situations such as these because each problem we come up against is unique, if only, on account of absence of simultaneity. Unique in content, surely. But unique in form, usually not. Whether you are attempting to control stock-in-trade in industry or trying to work out a manpower problem the form of the two problems is the same, ie both are aspects of resource allocation where the resources are limited. Or gain look at an examiner checking answer books—he may, be quick or slow just as an auditor may be quick or slow, or just as a spotter aeroplane may be quick or slow. Each is concerned with some kind of search. The quicker you are, the larger your sample but the observational errors are also large. The slower you are, the smaller your sample but the observational errors are minimized. These activities are subject to the same kind of analysis involving sampling and observational errors. Though, in each case the content is very, very different. You only have to put the threesome ie the professor, the chartered accountant and the pilot together to find out!

It is only when we decide against a piecemeal anti-integrative approach to problem solving that we will be able to generate the all important overview which is a prerequisite for broad strategic plan. It will only then be possible not only to strike at our most urgent problems but also to ensure that we do so in a systematic way and while working within an all-embracing plan. It is also necessary to make sure that individuals at each level of the hierarchy are being involved to the extent desirable. Not too much nor too little, but in just the right measure. Can we not recognize many situations where persons in authority are involved too much in petty detail at the expense of work that should be attended to or is not done all, being blissfully ignorant of what is going on.

In case the impression has been given that all committees are a waste of time, far from it; but we must realise that most committees evolve out of a reaction to inefficiencies of all sorts. The principal inefficiency is lack of co-ordination. As long as we recognize that the committee is a means to an end and that its output (recommendations etc) does not constitute action, we are faced with the immediate haunting thought: that the existing system has made a mess of things. Will it be in a position to translate the committee output into something tangible? There are three alternatives before us:

1. To publicise the recommendations all over the hope for the best.
2. To ensure proper orientation—through post-experience training at all levels—of those concerned with implementation. After all Rome was not built in a day.
3. To by-pass the present way of doing things selectively. As long as the overall strategy is clear, which implies a definition of objectives, we can be reasonably assured provided those concerned with its execution are personally willing to commit themselves whole-heartedly to the creation of conditions conducive to growth of merit. This means designing and setting up of formal (systematic) work flow methods. Because it is only through such

formalization that we can provide a lasting mechanism to sense change which permits speedy realignment so as to keep the boat on an even keel. This is the only way to ensure organizational health and vitality.

/strategy