SOME BROAD STRATEGIES TO SHIELD PEOPLE FROM INVASIVE BUREAUCRACY

*Recognising that services themselves struggle with Technocratic Managerialism, **Michael Kendrick** offers some broad strategies to organisations and workers who can become effective buffers against impersonal bureaucratic processes that intrude into the lives of the people they support. Michael is a regular contributor to* CRUcial Times.

The growth of formal systems for providing services to millions of people in affluent societies has produced a rapid growth of organisations, systems, and bureaucracies. These vary in size from small to large and take on both governmental and non-governmental forms. The character and operating ethics of these systems vary widely as do the effects of their functioning on the people who are served. The processes of bureaucracy formation and growth have drawn the people served, and the people doing the serving, into endless encounters with bureaucracy that many believe to be fruitless and unnecessary for the actual conduct of services.

Often, the organisations involved act as if such encounters are benign or of no great consequence to the net quality of consumer or family experience, quite apart from that of their own staff. Nonetheless, many people are quite distressed by this phenomenon and have consciously been trying to discover ways of having services exist in such a way that the people served will have minimal bureaucratic encounters and a different kind of relationship with them. In other words, they want to create low-bureaucracy service models in which an ethic of 'right relationship' prevails.

Bureaucracy Minimisation. This goal can be accomplished by some rather obvious strategies. The first is simply that of devising ways of delivering services that minimise the total amount of bureaucracy that is required to operate the actual service. This approach does not equate to the entire elimination of bureaucracy, as desirable as that may be for some people. It simply means that the design of any bureaucratic functions are done in such a way that they go from 'greater' to 'lesser' bureaucracy in terms of the amount of bureaucracy. A simple example of this would be a reduction of paperwork, meetings, and other time involvements, particularly as they relate to the service user.

Reducing The Overall Invasiveness of Bureaucracy. This approach refers to the designing of bureaucracy so that it does not invade the life of consumers and families. In other

words, the bureaucratic functions might still exist but they function outside the orbit of the people being served. This non-intrusive approach would require the recognition that there are domains which are best left untouched by bureaucracy if at all possible; domains such as one's home, dreams, personal relationships, family life and so on. Nonetheless, the reduction of invasiveness does not necessarily mean that bureaucratic control over one's life has ended or diminished, as its presence may be felt at other levels.

Challenging Bureaucratic Control and Domination Of People's Lives. If bureaucracy were less controlling and imperial in its orientation to the lives of people, then it might even be possible to imagine bureaucracies acting in ways that were enabling, empowering, or even liberating to some degree. However, this polarity from greater to lesser levels of control over decisions affecting people's lives is worthy of close examination. It may well be possible for many services to operate in a manner in which control is given back to people, both structurally and attitudinally, with all the advantages that may come with this new, right kind of relationship between the bureaucracy and the people that it ought to support. A good deal of this will hinge on how decisions are taken and how authority is shared with the people, or whether that authority is held exclusively by those in bureaucracies.

Constructing Intentional Bureaucratic Shields, Buffers And Filters. This strategy refers to designing bureaucracy so that various firewalls or shields exist, or are specifically created to prevent the assertion of elements of bureaucracy over the lives of people. Shielding people from bureaucracy requires that there is a recognition of the type of bureaucratic influences that must be blocked, neutralised, or otherwise rendered to be less of a factor in the life of a person.

Paradoxically, the bureaucracy that is seen as being a danger may also play a role in limiting itself by agreeing to, or even pioneering, special features of itself that shield consumers from harmful or unhelpful aspects of its own functioning. For instance, it may establish rights and protocols for consumers that enable consumers to independently deny or thwart the bureaucracy when they feel in peril from it. In many jurisdictions, this 'shielding' is facilitated by the bureaucracy, ensuring that its users have a right to an advocate, and to the resources for challenging the bureaucracy. To some degree, such changes will help to more thoroughly balance the needs of the user against the assertions and claims of the bureaucracy.

Defining Social Ethics That Could Help Reduce The Toxicity Of Bureaucratic Functioning. It has already been indicated that there must be a search for, and upholding of, 'right relationship' ethics that serve as a kind of template or discipline for designing solutions and evaluating how things are working. This suggests that a kind of triage may be needed, particularly at the level of actually guiding values and principles (and the beliefs and assumptions that justify these), to help identify where the interests of service users are being most injured. When setting things right, the most toxic and damaging

'false ethics' that can be discerned should be given the most attention. For instance, the classic, kindly, self-congratulatory paternalistic attitude of many top-down organisations may be comparatively less noxious than would be the practice of inflicting brutal, punitive and abusive staff on vulnerable and defenceless clients. Both are detrimental and odious, but perhaps not entirely comparable in the harm that they cause.

In any case, all such instances of degradation of consumers would eventually need to be met by another orientation that fully remedies the underlying moral or ethical deficiency that produced the toxicity in the first place. For instance, the relief that is needed to free people from abusive staff tormenters would necessarily need to include bureaucratic measures that had the effect of creating the means to detect, filter out, reorient, or remove staff who might be unsuitable. A key ethic needed to achieve this would be that of the bureaucracy not designing services *for* people or on behalf of them, but rather designing services *with* people, in a manner in which every important decision would be jointly taken between the organisation and the consumer. *With*-ness, as a guiding social ethic, would be a far less dangerous approach than would be an uncritical reliance on the good judgement of the organisation when it came to the design of services.

Conclusion. The strategies presented here are not intended to be a detailed plan for tackling the issue of invasive bureaucracy, but they do represent a seminal basis for the consideration of theory and practice that might help to tame and re-align morally feral, unresponsive, and dysfunctional bureaucracy. They also hold out the hope that we might one day get much better at what it takes to have bureaucracy that is subordinate to, and enabling of, human well-being. Hence, the problem ought not to be construed as being the existence of bureaucracies, as these are both a necessary evil and an aid to our lives, rather, the question is the *kind* of bureaucracies that we allow to flourish. We most certainly need a different vision of the kind of bureaucracy that is the most compatible with service to people.■