

# Cutting Through the Red Tape

## Strategies for Dealing with Bureaucrats

by Roger Neugebauer

### *Guidelines for Bureaucrats:*

- 1) *When in charge, ponder.*
- 2) *When in trouble, delegate.*
- 3) *When in doubt, mumble.*

— James H. Boren

The term *bureaucrat* conjures up the stereotype of a nit-picking, regulation-spouting, heartless, bumbling paper pusher. Yet bureaucrats no more fit a single mold than do child care directors or teachers. Some are rigid, others are flexible; some are brilliant, others are insipid; some are dedicated, others are self-serving.

What gives rise to the stereotype is that certain characteristics of life in the bureaucracy force employees to conform to standard and structured routines in performing their jobs. This article will describe these characteristics and how they affect bureaucrats' relationships with outside agencies. It will then outline some strategies for dealing with the types of bureaucrats child care directors are likely to encounter.



Roger Neugebauer is founding publisher of *Exchange* magazine and co-founder of the World Forum Foundation.

### Life in a Bureaucracy

Bureaucracies provide little motivation to work hard. Individuals typically come to work for bureaucracies sincerely committed to making an impact in their field. However, new employees' expectations of becoming involved in shaping major policies and in planning exciting new programs are soon dashed. New policies and programs are generally developed at the highest levels of the bureaucracy and then turned over to the lower levels to enforce or administer. One welfare official lamented, "I hoped to use my expertise to help improve services for children. Instead, I spend all my time tracking down lost payments, reviewing budget revisions, clearing audit reports, and running around getting 18 sign-offs on contracts. My master's degree in child development is irrelevant; I should have gotten one in paperwork."

Bureaucracies also provide little recognition for quality performance. Bureaucrats typically are responsible for monitoring or processing a workload of projects, contracts, or programs. If they fall behind in their production, they may receive considerable negative recognition in the form of pressure to produce from their superiors. However, if they

manage their work on a timely basis, their work tends to be taken for granted.

What the bureaucracy focuses on is quantity, not quality. What is important is how many licenses are renewed or how many contracts are approved, not the quality of care children receive in those programs.

Given the emphasis on paperwork and processing, bureaucrats are seldom required by the bureaucracy to exercise their professional skills. If they take an interest in improving quality of services, it is because their own personal standards demand it or because they are receiving recognition or support from outside the bureaucracy for doing so.

A contract representative may work particularly hard to gain full funding for high-quality programs, a welfare official may advocate the adoption of a sliding fee scale, or a licensing official might provide technical assistance to centers struggling to survive. Such efforts generally go unrewarded by the bureaucracy.

Bureaucracies pressure bureaucrats to conform. Bureaucracies manage routine work best — work to which the established rules, process, and schedules can be applied. When something comes

along that causes the bureaucracy to move outside its routine procedures, this causes problems and is resisted.

Thus, a bureaucrat advocating a procedural waiver for an innovative program or for the revocation of a particularly bad center's license will likely encounter resistance and resentment. Bureaucrats — those who deal directly with the outside agencies — in large part determine the outcome of requests from these agencies.

The pressures on a troublemaker to conform are considerable. The most effective pressure is that the more a bureaucrat inconveniences his co-workers by seeking non-routine actions, the harder it becomes to overcome their resistance and gain their support. A more long-term pressure is the fact that superiors will not actively fight for promotions for troublemakers. Those who conform with the routines are rewarded with promotions.

In addition, reassignment of duties is a common ploy for discouraging troublemakers. A social services worker who gets actively involved in advocating rate increases for centers may be reassigned to process Medicaid claims or to work in an undesirable geographic location. Finally, superiors can grind troublemakers into submission by rigidly enforcing office procedures — for example, personal phone calls may be forbidden and pay may be deducted for taking five minutes too long on a break.

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of bureaucrats eventually succumb to this pressure to conform. Many spirited advocates have been cowed into becoming pseudo-advocates who chant the clichés of their causes, but who no longer have the heart to fight the bureaucracy for them.

Bureaucracies reward outside agencies that conform to their routines and stan-

dards. The treatment outside agencies receive from a bureaucracy is largely determined by the extent to which they conform to the bureaucracy's established procedures. The likelihood of an agency's request being approved often has more to do with the way the agency fills out the forms than with the quality of services it provides. Requests that can't be handled via normal procedures cause inconvenience to bureaucrats. The tendency for the bureaucracy is to delay acting on such requests, to reject them on a technicality, or to return them for clarification.

The treatment an agency receives may also depend upon the extent to which it conforms to unofficial standards for good programs. Bureaucracies generally have neither the inclination nor the resources to fully evaluate providers' services. As a result, quality judgments are often based upon stereotypes and labels. Oftentimes a program will be reacted to as good or bad depending upon whether it is for-profit or non-profit, small or large, part-day or full-day.

---

*"Bureaucracy defends the status quo long past the time when the quo has lost its status."*  
— Laurence J. Peter

---

In other situations, a bureaucrat may label an agency depending upon his personal relationship with the director, the extent to which the agency complies with his requests, or the physical appearance of the agency's facility. Such labels, once established, are communicated to co-workers and are slow to change.

Bureaucracies unofficially delegate operational decisions to the lowest levels. While bureaucrats at the lowest levels are virtually powerless to influence the

bureaucracy's policy development, many do exercise considerable control over the day-to-day decisions. First-line bureaucrats — those who deal directly with the outside agencies — in large part determine the outcome of requests from these agencies. They seldom have the authority to make any final decisions, but their supervisors generally adhere to their recommendations on routine, non-controversial decisions.

Supervisors commonly manage four to ten workers, each of whom may work with ten or more outside agencies. Therefore, a supervisor cannot possibly be familiar with all the requests from all the agencies and must, of necessity, rely on the opinions of the workers.

First-line bureaucrats' strongest power is of a negative kind. While they may have a difficult time gaining approval for requests, they can easily prevent their approval. They can make a recommendation that a request be denied, which will be difficult to reverse unless the requesting agency has supporters in the higher echelons. They can delay processing a request until a deadline has passed. They can pester the agency interminably for additional information or revisions. If all else fails, they can lose the paperwork.

## Strategies for Dealing with Bureaucrats

### ■ Be a friend — not an antagonist.

For many bureaucrats, the most satisfying aspect of their work is their relationships with the organizations and individuals they deal with outside the bureaucracy. If a bureaucrat derives satisfaction from a pleasant professional relationship with a child care center, she will be motivated to work hard to see to it that the center's requests receive fair and expeditious treatment. If she is irritated or offended by the center,

she will be more likely to exercise her negative powers.

■ **Establish rapport with bureaucrats.**

Don't treat them like impersonal cogs in a giant machine. Show concern for their personal interests.

■ **Give them a tour of your program.**

Invite them to lunch with the children. Introduce them to your staff, board members, and parents.

■ **Keep in touch regularly, not just when you have a problem or need money.**

Invite them to special occasions (Thanksgiving dinners, annual meetings, carnivals). Send them regular progress reports, newsletters, and announcements.

■ **Show your appreciation for their work on your behalf.**

Thank them personally. Write a letter to their supervisor to let them know what a good job they are doing.

■ **Strive for fairness, not favoritism.**

If it becomes apparent that you are befriending a bureaucrat in hopes he will ignore a blatant licensing violation or push through an unnecessary budget increase, this will more likely rub his ego the wrong way and cause him to work against you. An attempt to buy a bureaucrat's unquestioning support through wining and dining is also more likely to backfire than not.

■ **Make bureaucrats your advocates.**

Since bureaucrats receive little professional stimulation from pushing papers inside the bureaucracy, they often welcome opportunities to provide technical assistance to service providers. (It's an irony of the field that frustrated bureaucrats long to work in centers where they can be directly involved providing services, while burned-out directors seek to move into bureaucracies so they can have a broader impact on programs

and policies.) It is especially helpful to get their assistance in shaping projects or proposals, which will be submitted to the bureaucracy. Once they have a stake in a project, they are not likely to let it die easily.

■ **Don't show bureaucrats only your center's bright spots.**

Share your problems with them and get their advice on solutions. Ask them how other centers they work with are handling these problems.

---

*"I do not rule Russia;  
ten thousand clerks do."*  
— Czar Nicholas I

---

■ **It can be particularly helpful to gain the bureaucrat's support when the problem is the result of her bureaucracy's policies or procedures.**

She may be able to find loopholes, waiver procedures, or other proper means of getting around the problem. If not, having seen the effect of a policy on a center, she may be motivated to advocate from within for changing the policy.

- When preparing requests to the bureaucracy (applications for a license renewal, funding proposals, annual financial reports), seek the advice of the bureaucrats. Twenty minutes spent going over a proposal with a bureaucrat before it is filed may save weeks of delays caused by filling it out improperly or by not explaining certain sections fully enough. If your center is about to file an unusual request, such as a major mid-year budget revision or a waiver request for a particular licensing requirement, the bureaucrat may be able to suggest ways of framing the request that will help you comply with the bureaucracy's standard routines and procedures.

- Give bureaucrats opportunities to become involved in major policy debates. Invite them to participate in local coalitions or associations that are active in advocacy around policy issues. If they can be fired up about the importance of certain policy changes, they are more likely to act as advocates for policy reform within the bureaucracy. Advocates within the bureaucracy who are not inspired and supported from the outside soon lose their enthusiasm and become pseudo-advocates.

■ **Don't become too dependent upon individual bureaucrats.**

While it is vital to gain the understanding and support of the bureaucrats who deal directly with your center, it can be a mistake to rely solely on their support. No bureaucrat is going to care about your center as much as you do. While they may support your requests, given the many pressures they are under, they may not push your requests as aggressively as you might wish.

■ **Become thoroughly informed about how the bureaucracy functions.**

Find out the names and responsibilities of all the individuals who handle your requests. Become thoroughly familiar with the rules and procedures that affect your center. Don't rely on bureaucrats to interpret the rules for you. Find out which rules can be waived and who has the authority to waive them. Talk to other directors and find out the various ways in which unclear rules have been applied.

■ **Get to know all the decision makers in the bureaucracy personally.**

Make a point of introducing yourself to the head of the organization, as well as to the secretaries, auditors, financial analysts, and other technicians who may handle your center's

requests. If they know you personally, it is somewhat less likely they will treat a request from you as just another piece of paper to push. Also, they will be more likely to listen and give you an honest answer when you call in to check on the status of a request.

- **Develop a contact in the bureaucracy who will give you an accurate report on the status of your requests.** It is best, of course, if you can develop sufficient rapport with the first-line bureaucrats who deal with you directly so that they will always give you honest reports. If you are dealing with a climber, a conserver, or a pseudo-advocate, however, you may find that they cannot be relied upon. They may say, for example, that a budget revision is being held up in another office while in fact it has been sitting on their desk for a week. If this is the case, it behooves you to make a friend in the bureaucracy who can provide reliable reports. Don't be reluctant to develop such contacts. You are not seeking inside information — you are seeking information that you are fully entitled to have.

---

*“We can lick gravity, but sometimes the  
paperwork is overwhelming.”*  
— Wernher von Braun

---

- **Know how and when to apply pressure.** Often, developing a good working relationship with a first-line bureaucrat will not be enough to ensure that your center is treated fairly by the bureaucracy. Your license renewal may be rejected over a questionable interpretation of a rule, your school lunch reimbursement claim may be delayed unreasonably long, or you may be required to submit unnecessarily detailed financial reports. In such instances, it may be necessary to apply some pressure on the bureaucracy. However, if pressure is applied at the wrong time or in the wrong place, this could do more harm than good.
- **Don't make a cause célèbre out of every minor delay and setback.** An organization that develops the label of chronic complainer will soon find the bureaucracy turning a deaf

## Four Types of Bureaucrats

### Climbers

- Seek to maximize their own power, income, and prestige through increased rank and authority
- Tend to enforce or ignore agency rules depending upon what best suits their personal interests
- Promote reorganizations and changes, which provide them with opportunities to increase their power base
- Insert themselves in the center of decision making wherever possible

### Advocates

- Seek to promote specific causes by fighting on their behalf from within the bureaucracy
- Work to promote decisions favorable to their cause by coordinating pressures from inside and outside the bureaucracy, as well as by winning over key decision makers
- Bend, stretch, and ignore agency rules on behalf of their cause and look for loopholes or seek revisions in rules that are disadvantageous
- Constantly fight for changes in agency policies and structures that further their causes

### Conservers

- Seek to maximize their security and convenience through maintaining their current position and income
- Escape responsibility for decision making so as not to risk making bad or controversial decisions
- Rigidly apply agency's rules, exercise minimal personal discretion, and try not to rock the boat
- Oppose organizational changes that might threaten their position

### Pseudo-advocates

- Sympathize with specific causes, yet are unwilling or unable to promote them in the bureaucracy
- Complain about decisions that hurt their cause, but do not work hard to influence them
- Enforce agency rules while claiming they disagree, but are powerless to change them
- Constantly talk about the need for changes, but do little to actively promote them

*This classification is derived from one proposed by Anthony Downs (see References), but modified on the basis of the author's experience.*

ear on its complaints. Regular phone calls to politely inquire on the status of your requests are more likely to prevent routine delays.

■ **Avoid alienating bureaucrats.** Similarly, if you have developed a good relationship with and are receiving generally good service from a first-line bureaucrat, it is not in your best interest in the long run to alienate this bureaucrat by going over his head when an isolated breakdown does occur. A more effective strategy would be to consult the bureaucrat directly. Ask him where the delay or problem is and get his advice on how you can most effectively bring pressure to bear. If, on the other hand, you find that you are receiving consistently poor service from the first-line bureaucrat assigned to your center, you should request that a different individual be assigned. Ask for a meeting with the field representative's immediate supervisor. Cite specifically how in case after case the bureaucrat in question has failed to act responsibly on your requests, supplied you with inaccurate information, or failed to inform you of deadlines and policy changes.

■ **When it is time to apply pressure, it is best to attack with facts, not emotions.** A display of righteous indignation may be effective in gaining the attention of the head of the bureaucracy; but in the final analysis, it will be the facts you present that will influence her decision.

If you are complaining about unnecessary delays and red tape, you should document the date your request was submitted, as well as the dates you contacted the bureaucracy by letter or phone seeking a status report, who responded to your inquiry, and what was said. If you are protesting an unfair decision, go to the rules and regulations and demonstrate why the

decision was not appropriate. Also cite examples of how in the past or in other jurisdictions an opposite decision was made on similar cases.

■ **Give the bureaucracy a means of saving face.** Bureaucrats, like everyone else, have egos and prefer not to admit publicly that they made a mistake. Superiors don't like to alienate their staffs by publicly criticizing their actions or inactions.

■ **Don't demand that a decision be reversed;** rather ask that it be reconsidered on the basis of new information that you are supplying (even if you are only restating or clarifying what was presented initially). Even be prepared to offer to make some minor changes in your position so that the

bureaucracy can announce that a compromise was reached. Give them a means of making a graceful retreat.

## References

- Altshuler, A. (1977). *The politics of the federal bureaucracy*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers.
- Boren, J. H. (1972). *When in doubt, mumble: A bureaucrat's handbook*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company.
- Downs, A. (1973). "Inside bureaucracy: Five types of bureaucrats." In H. J. Leavitt and L. R. Pondy (Eds.), *Readings in managerial psychology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## Understanding Bureaucratese

Conservers and pseudo-advocates tend to convey unpleasant news with obtuse stock phrases so as to avoid the inconvenience of having to assuage angry clients. The following examples demonstrate how to interpret such phrases.

*This looks good to me, but I'll have to clear it through the front office.*

**Translation:** Your proposal stinks, and I plan to reject it, but I'd prefer you to think it was my boss who shot it down.

*You mean you haven't received our answer yet?*

**Translation:** I haven't done a thing on your request, but I'd prefer you to think I had and that the post office lost our reply.

*I don't make the rules — I just carry them out.*

**Translation:** I could have fought to get a waiver to approve your request, but it was so much easier for me to simply reject it.

*He'll be in conference all day or*

*He's away from his desk now.*

**Translation:** He hasn't even looked at your budget revision yet, but he doesn't have the guts to tell you that.