

Bureaucracy: A Tool for Scuttling Application of Innovative Ideas in the Nigerian Public Service

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Abstract

It could be argued that Bureaucracy and Innovation are inextricably linked in that organizations that are desirous of survival and growth particularly in a turbulent environment requires the application of both concepts. For instance, whereas bureaucracy introduces specialization, structure, rules and regulations, predictability, rationality and partial democracy amongst others, innovation brings about positive changes that quite often assist in surmounting impediments in the quest for growth. In practice however, reverse sometimes appears to be the case. In the Nigerian Public Service, for instance, superior officers employ the same bureaucracy as a means of scuttling the application of innovative ideas especially where such ideas emanate from their subordinates. Thus perceived, this article proposes a provision of opportunities for superior and subordinate officers to be similarly exposed to sources of acquisition of innovative ideas as a means of gaining the support of superior officers during the application of such ideas. In addition, opportunities could be created for innovators to occupy leadership positions where they will possess the authority to diffuse such ideas down the line.

Keywords: Bureaucracy, Innovative Idea, Application, Public Service

Introduction

Perhaps a convenient point to approach our subject of discourse is an examination of the views of Hicks and Gullet (1982:127):

Imagine human organizations without structure, without stability, and without order. Chaos prevails. To overcome what otherwise would be utter confusion – to give his organizations (and thus also in large measure himself) structure, stability, and order, man has created bureaucracy.

Although developed essentially by sociologists who, by and large, took a relative scholarly, detached, descriptive point of view, organizations based on bureaucracy have been in existence for thousands of years. For example, fully developed and large bureaucracies existed in ancient Egypt, China and the Roman Empire. In fact, among the few heritages of colonialism in the developing world is the bureaucratically structured public service which, presumably, is designed to promote administrative efficiency; that is, precision, speed, unambiguity, minimal friction and the reduction of costs. The bureaucratic or formal organization model was therefore, for many generations, the dominant model in public administration. While other perspectives have since emerged, the model continued to occupy an important place in the field.

Against the foregoing backdrop, the Article is arranged as follows:

- (i) Conceptual Clarifications from where significant parameters for subsequent analysis will emerge;
- (ii) The inherent negativisms of Bureaucracy;
- (iii) The Nigerian Experience; and



- (iv) Treatment variables.

Conceptual Clarification

Several attempts have been made at defining this concept of bureaucracy. A few of these will suffice:

- (i) A label and an epithet, bureaucracy denotes an integrated hierarchy of specialized offices defined by systematic rules – an impersonal routinized structure wherein legitimized authority rests in the office and not in the person of the incumbent (Arthur Davis, 1949:144-145);
- (ii) An institutionalized strategy for the achievement of administrative objectives by the concerted efforts of many officials (Peter Blau, 1976:76);
- (iii) A type of organization designed to accomplish large-scale administrative tasks by co-ordinating the work of a large number of persons in a systematic manner (Robert Appleby, 1981:76);
- (iv) A compact formulation composed of a highly established hierarchy of authority, superimposed upon a highly elaborated division of labour (Victor Thompson, 1961:18);
- (v) Bureaucracy exists everywhere, in the civil and public services as well as in large organized private sector. Derived from the French word bureau, meaning ‘a writing table or desk’, the bureaucrat is the clerk or official that sits behind the desk or writing table. It was indeed coined in the 19th century by the French encyclopaedists as a term of contempt (P.N.C. Okigbo, 1986:7).
- (vi) The most rationally efficient form of organization (Max Weber, 1947: 333-334)

The common denominator among these definitions could be found in the views of Hicks and Gullet earlier cited. And that is, an ordered system which aids efficient and effective accomplishment of tasks in large organizations. It is however to Max Weber that we must credit the conceptualization of what could be termed as the most modern perception of bureaucracy. According to him, “the fully developed bureaucratic mechanism compares with another organization exactly as does the machine with non-mechanical modes of production. Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of materials and personal costs – these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration...”. Continuing, he states that bureaucracy and bureaucratic practices are functionally necessary for the operation of a large administrative apparatus, where things are done in the way they should and where structure and hierarchy are similarly indispensable to the efficient performance of work in a large-scale organization. He insists that bureaucracy is the only concept that guarantees efficiency and effectiveness to organizations, especially government organizations. Accordingly, this occurs because experts, as found within the bureaucracy, are the best qualified to make technically correct decisions and because disciplined performance, governed by abstract roles and co-ordinated by the authority hierarchy, fosters a rational and consistent pursuit of organizational goals, (Blau and Scott, 1963:33). Max Weber sums up his views in his now famous model of bureaucracy from where we identify the normative quality of bureaucracy.



It is instructive therefore to note that bureaucracy, at least, the Weberian model is a normative model. It is not a product of nature rather; it is a man-made, invented, conceptual model of organizations. As a normative model, it does not primarily describe particular organizations that exist. The emphasis is more on describing an ideal (normative) pattern of organization that conforms to and implements certain assumptions and values. As Weber wrote, "In its conceptual purity, the mental construct (bureaucracy) cannot be found anywhere in reality. It is utopian". Generally speaking, Weber's model ensures precision, speed, unambiguity, objectivity, continuity, unity and strict subordination. It provides several powerful functions, often seen as advantages in organizations. These include specialization, structure, predictability, rationality and partial democracy, which we shall take seriatim for analysis.

Another concept that is germane to this article is innovation. The inevitability of innovation is informed by a dire need for organizations to survive and grow. As a concept, it entails the introduction of new ideas that would enhance achievement of organizational purposes thereby ensuring growth in the organization. This perception appears to agree with the definition provided by the New Oxford Dictionary of English, (1998:942), thus: "Making changes to something established by introducing something new". The foregoing definition is provided on the assumption that to innovate, we must build on the existing practices. The definition is further modified by Sullivan (2008:5) as stated hereunder;

Innovation is the process of making changes, large and small, radical and increment, to products, processes, and services that result in the introduction of something new for the organization that adds value to customers and contributes to the knowledge store of the organization.

He further posits that applying innovation entails adding some key words to the foregoing definition thus; *Applying innovation is the application of practical tools and techniques that make changes...* The view expressed by Drucker (1988) is equally instructive. According to him, innovation can be viewed as a purposeful and focused effort to achieve change in an organization's economic or social potential.

There are however some other interrelated concepts that are sometimes either perceived as synonyms of innovation or share the same purpose. For purposes of clarity, we shall attempt the definition of such concepts and establish relationships of each of them to the concept of innovation. One of such concepts is **invention**. This term is often used in the context of innovation. Again, we pay a visit to the New Oxford Dictionary of English (1988:960) and it has this to say: "Invention is creating something new that has never existed before". This definition, although relates to innovation in that something new is brought about but, differs from the definition of innovation as provided by the same dictionary. Whereas the dictionary attempts to see innovation as introducing something new on an existing or established procedure, invention on the other hand, appears more radical in that what is being introduced has never existed before. Some authorities thus, classify invention as radical and innovation as incremental. Radical in that it starts on a new slate by introducing something new that has never existed before. Incremental in that something new is being introduced through modifying an existing technique or technology.

Innovation is equally associated with growth just like we explained earlier that, it is only through innovation that an organization can grow, particularly, in a turbulent environment



characterised by ever changing policies of government, and stiff competition from sister organizations. Growth occurs in a number of ways, such as better service, quality and shorter lead time in non-profit organizations and cost reduction, cost avoidance and increased turnover in profit-oriented organizations.

Another interrelated concept is **creativity** which Rosenfeld and Serves (1991) regard as a key building block of innovation. It is a mental process that results in the production of novel ideas and concepts that are appropriate, useful and actionable. Accordingly, Wallas, (1926) identifies four distinct phases in creativity viz: preparation, incubation, illumination and verification. To this is added by Kao, (1989), structuring and finalizing the idea in a form that can be readily communicated to others. Creativity entails a level of originality and novelty that is essential for innovation. Although it is a fundamental part of innovation, both terms are not synonymous. Innovation encourages the further processing of the output of the creative process (the idea) so as to allow the exploitation of its potential value through development. Creativity brings about new ideas which correspondingly lead to the introduction of new things. To that extent, both terms are interrelated.

In terms of **Change**, we view innovation as resulting in change but we cannot equate it to change. For change to qualify as innovation, it must have some degree of desirability and intentionality (West and Farr, 1990:11). However, we do know that change can have a positive or negative impact on the organization, whereas innovation, by definition, must be positive because, it must add value to the customer. We can therefore posit that all innovations can be viewed as changes, but not all changes can be viewed as innovations.

Wither, Initiative? Recently developed proactivity concept such as personal initiative and voice behaviour may be crucial for the translation of creative ideas into successfully implemented innovations (Frese, 2000). Personal initiative (Frese and Fay, 2001:133) comprises a range of self-started, proactive and persistent behaviours such as going substantially beyond the prescribed contents of one's job (qualitative initiative), spending additional energy at work (quantitative initiative), and demonstrating perseverance in the face of obstacles (overcoming barriers). To this extent, initiative may predict innovation. In a similar term, initiative may moderate the relationship between creativity and innovation such that ideas are more likely to be implemented if initiative is high (Frese 2000:424). Initiative may equally modify relations between innovation and outcomes (Bae and Frese, 2003:49).

What of Proactivity? - Proaction involves creating change, not merely anticipating it. It does not just involve the important attributes of flexibility on the adaptability towards an uncertain future. To be proactive is to take the initiative in improving business. At the other extreme, behaviour that is not proactive includes sitting-back, letting others try to make things happen, and passively hoping that externally imposed change "Works out okay" (Bateman and Crant, 1999:63). Proactive behaviour generally has a positive influence on how people are perceived by others. Proactivity entails forward looking, constantly peering into the future to identify opportunities and threats and providing solutions to anticipated problems. Generally speaking, organisations benefit from the proactive behaviour of their members. Our conclusion however, is to the extent that proactivity involves both change, and introduction of new ideas or strategies of operations, it is equally related to innovation.

Bureaucracy and Innovation

Application of innovative ideas, we aver, is inevitable for an organization that is desirous of survival and growth. And bureaucracy is a means of achieving that purpose. However, there is the tendency for senior officers to capitalize on the ills of bureaucracy to torpedo the implementation of innovation ideas particularly, where such ideas emanate from subordinate officers. This tendency seems to be in place having regards to extant literature on the subject, particularly that in organization theory which dealt with bureaucracy. In it, Hicks and Gullet (1976: 144-152) X-rayed the ills of bureaucracy as they affect formal organizations as possible causes of inability of superior officers to appreciate contributions made by their subordinates especially where such contributions are seen as innovative and hence do not strictly accord with role-expectations of the subordinates. According to the authors, "Formal organizations may have built into their designs the seeds for many non-productive, dysfunctional, energy-consuming activities at all levels which tend to result in organizational rigidity, organizational defensiveness, and intergroup conflict, as well as less effective decision making process".

Rigidity as highlighted by Hicks and Gullet appears to be one of the most dysfunctional elements of bureaucracy. Here, it is seen as non-adaptive and thus is in conflict with the basic adaptability laws of nature. It leads to strict adherence to regulations which in the author's words produces 'timidity', conservatism' and 'technicism'. In an earlier work, Downs (1967: 100) explained that superior officers resort to being rigid in a bureaucratic set up for fear of losing power, prestige and their income. This is because, they occupy positions in which decision making is inevitable because decisions can prove to be wrong, unpopular or both. Superior officers in such bureaucratic organizations therefore, tend to be avoiders who try to escape responsibility for making decisions. However, since it is inevitable that they make decisions, they resort to rigidly applying the rules of procedure promulgated by higher authorities. Many superior officers generally eschew even the slightest deviation from written procedures unless they obtain approval from higher authority. This attitude of rigidity and its attendant problems which include delays in obtaining official rulings for unusual situations leads to stereotyped conditions which Downs refers to as 'bureaucratic mentality' and 'red tape'.

The rigidity in roles occasioned by strict adherence to rules and regulations often creates a situation where officers perform their jobs without any emotional attachment, particularly, where subordinates come up with official problems. This is another ill of bureaucratic organizations highlighted by Hicks and Gullet and referred to by Thompson (1975: 3-23) as 'impersonality' in the performance of official responsibilities. Infact, Thompson in his earlier book –"Modern Organisation (1961:152-177), referred to the ills of the bureaucratic organisation as 'Bureau pathology', a disease of bureaucracy which he further suggested are those dysfunctions which are produced by "bureaupathic behaviour'. However, the central themes of his later book "Without Sympathy or Enthusiasm", is the impersonality of modern complex bureaucratic organisation and the search for objectivity at the administrative level in the process of decision making. In that book, Thompson explained the cause of a personal promise made to an individual which was not fulfilled. The question that emerged therefrom is whether institutions could make and honour personal promises made on their behalf by the employees. This stimulated the most widely distributed and deeply held sociological



theory of bureaucracy, the notion that bureaucrats invent the means of administration with more value than they do the ends - the "inversion of means and ends" or the "displacement of goals". Administration has therefore been defined as the triumph of technique over purpose or objectives. Here, therefore, is the critical dilemma of an individual who has a personal problem to be resolved by bureaucratic organisation, yet the organisation is lost in a complex maze of rules and regulations that prescribe processes and procedures for arriving at a particular decision, albeit, without sympathy or empathy, just because the bureaucratic organisation is constantly striving to maintain objectivity and impersonality in its quest for rational decision making.

In summing up the above arguments, Hicks and Gullet posit that bureaucracy has many unintended consequences or dysfunctions. They further describe bureaucracy as a "machine model" that is non adaptive and impersonal. Its rigidity, they opine, leads to its failure to account adequately for many important human characteristics. They contend that it offers numerous opportunities for members to displace objectives and to work for personal or subunit goals which may not contribute adequately to the achievement of overall objectives of the organization. In their views, innovative ideas are seen by bureaucratic officials as disturbances to an otherwise ordered situation. Such ideas are therefore never seen as a necessary life - giving elements to an evolving, adaptive organization.

The Nigerian Experience

The dysfunctional characteristics of bureaucracy vis-a-vis implementation of innovative ideas clearly manifest in the Nigerian situation. The Public Service Review Commission thus, observed that the Nigerian Public services are' characterised by a spirit of animosity and jealousy rather than of cooperation and team work. This spirit of animosity, it further observed, exists between peers as well as between superiors and subordinates. In fact, the animosity and jealousy become very high when a subordinate is perceived by his superior officer as being innovative and may supersede him. In order to forestall the implementation of innovative ideas that emanate from subordinates the superior officers resort to strict adherence to rules and regulations which they often argue are at variance with the innovation being contemplated. In obvious reference to this state of affairs, the Commission in paragraph 40 of its main report noted that:

Our examination of the Ministry reveals that the majority of their staff take a narrow view of their responsibilities. There is a tendency to concentrate on rules, regulations and procedures. These rules are not sufficiently positive, nor are they devised to meet the new task and the development needs of government. They reflect more concern over rights and perquisites than obligations; more concern over security and job protection than innovation, creativeness and productivity. Personnel officers act as watchdogs of the rules and their application.

In a similar vein, Balogun (1983:8-9) identified resistance to innovative ideas as one of the factors that differentiate the Nigeria public sector from its private sector counterpart in situations where public administration is linked with the public sector while business administration is linked with the private sector. According to the author, the tendency to resist innovative ideas is higher in public management. It ought to have been 'killed' with the



transformations which public sector management in Nigeria had undergone over time. Other factors identified by Balogun which are inextricably linked with 'resistance to innovative ideas are survival, maintenance of status quo, risk avoidance, mistake avoidance, self - protecting, fear of trouble, fear of the unknown, retroactive (fire fighting).

Another evidence of stifling innovative ideas particularly where such ideas emanate from subordinates in the Nigerian Public Service is provided by the Study Team on the Structure, Staffing, and' Operation's of the Nigerian Federal Civil Service headed by Professor 'Dotun Philips. In its report, the study Team observed that the decision-making process and implementation mechanics of the Civil Service have been highly criticized by both Government and Public as bureaucratic, slow, rigid, and secretive and not development - oriented. A major cause of the aforementioned problems, according to the report, is the inability of senior officers to take decisions unless a clearance is obtained from the top - most senior officer in whom all authority is vested. The Study Team feels that the tendency is for trivial issues to go through a long chain of officers before a decision is taken. This situation, it continued, leads not only to time - wasting, but also kills the initiative and discretion of intermediate officers leading to frustration and lack of confidence in the ability of officers to take decisions. In such circumstance, therefore, innovative ideas emanating from subordinates are not accepted by a superior officer who feels that he is incompetent to implement such ideas and similarly feels reluctant to pass such suggestions to the point where a decision could be taken. Even when such suggestions are so passed, they never see 'the light of the day' because, they are 'killed' somewhere along the line. The Study Team therefore suggested a short - circuiting of this long process of decision taking by limiting policy formulation to the Management and Directorate levels (i.e. Grade levels 13 to 17). This, it is hoped, would break what amounts to 'bureaucratic bottlenecks' in decision taking and encourage introduction of innovative ideas in the service.

In his empirical study Mmobuosi (1983:37) interviewed six newly trained personnel in the Federal Civil Service of Nigeria, and the Following are their replies:

1. "They say I am revolutionary. They want gradual process. I can't force them. I can only recommend".
2. "I consulted a colleague and he replied, just do your work as they want and you are O.k."
3. "My colleague who was an expert in the field of the ideas I brought would not act because he said he was unfairly treated."
4. "I felt like asking (of what was being done with my recommendations) but I don't want to be seen to be applying pressure on him ... There is a limit to which one can go."
5. "I wish I had tried to make people see how we could work better. Not that I would have succeeded but maybe I would have."
6. "Well, when I returned to my organization, I did write a report Frankly speaking, I cannot tell you, I have no idea whether the report was useful. Nobody asked my opinion Well I did not think it was wise for me to pressurize him or to press him or to teach him what to do about my report... I kept quiet."

The point of emphasis from the foregoing is that New Ideas Management principles are not applied in the public service probably because they infringe upon rules and regulations. This has thus led to the inability of superior officers to appreciate the contributions made by their



innovative subordinates. This, however, has certain implications: The enthusiasm of the innovative subordinates will be dampened: the innovative subordinates are likely to withdraw, thus leading to loss of productivity in the service; and the innovators can be frustrated out of the service. What was highlighted in the literature was further confirmed by a recent study. The revelation from the study is that superior officers actually resist innovative ideas being suggested by their subordinates. The following seem to be reasons for such resistance: The fear that the innovative subordinates might supersede them; Envy at personal level; and Fear of infringing on the rules and regulations etc.

Resistance to innovative management practices, when and where initiated by subordinates tends to stimulate two types of adjustment behavior in the latter group. The usual adjustment strategy is for the innovative subordinate to reverse to the status quo ante' either on a permanent basis or temporarily until he has status and authority enough to install his ideas. A more unusual strategy which Fleishmen et al (1955), Sykes (1962: 227-243) and Bobbitt et al (1978:302) had, however, observed is recourse to the exit option whereby the stalled staffer withdraws his membership of and services to the organization. Sykes in his study of 1962 had reported that 19 of the 97 participants in a training programme he studied left their organizations within one year in reaction to resistances to innovations they had initiated or were attempting to initiate. Where disengagement occurs, the loss to organization is higher and irreconcilable as the probability of future gains from the skills being lost reduces to zero level.

Strategies for Ameliorating the Situation

The study earlier referred to further revealed that superior officers cooperate with their trained subordinates in introducing and implementing innovative ideas acquired from training only if such superior officers were similarly exposed. This phenomenon could be explained using the Linking – pin model adopted by Stiefel (1974: 13) from an earlier work by Likert (1961). Stiefel thus uses this model to advocate a strategy that would ensure the successful application of knowledge, skills, attitudes and innovative ideas acquired from training courses back on the job. The strategy he advocated can take either of two forms: (i) for intact work group members to be trained together: or (ii) for linking – pin group members to attend the same course. He contends that where these are done, the likely result is a commonality of attitudes and behaviors. Thus, everyone will cooperate with an attempt to implement ideas emanating from such exposure, since they have similar experience.

The superior officer may even use his leadership position to ensure that other organizational members particularly in his department similarly support and cooperate with their peers in implementing the innovative ideas. In this circumstance, a more plausible conclusion with respect to leadership support for innovation in the Nigerian public service is that such support is more likely to be given where the superior had similar exposure. The more widespread such superiors are in the Service, the greater is the chance for new ideas in Management practices to be accepted and allowed to take root.

One way of ensuring systems improvement at a more specific level seems to be (i) the expansion of opportunities so that more staffers can benefit, and (ii) the creation of opportunities for the innovator to rise to leadership position as a condition for diffusing and sustaining innovative management behaviour in the Nigerian Public Service.

This article equally persists that the challenge is not to be frustrated by the resistance to the introduction of innovative ideas either by superior officers, or subordinates. To gain the much needed leadership support therefore, patience, perseverance, persuasion and above all, tact are the key words in introducing innovative ideas. Tactfulness and persuasive tendencies in convincing superior officers about the relevance and positive contributions of innovative ideas have been found to work for many. On the contrary, assuming an egoistic posture in marketing ideas to superior officers jeopardizes the acceptance of such ideas, no matter how noble or useful to the organization.

In view of this, it is desirable to capitalize on the 'Factor of Criticality' in bringing about innovation in organizations. What this means is that, instead of attempting to effect innovation in the entire organization, one could look for critical areas or leverage points within the system where the positive effect of innovation can easily be felt. This could be in one's section, division or department. The positive result may be all that one needs to convince his reactive bosses, apathetic peers and uncompromising subordinates.

Conclusion

Innovation, innovative ideas and applicability of such ideas, we aver, guarantee survival and growth of organizations. Thus perceived, organizations that are desirous of such growth, invest heavily on Research and Development as well as training activities which have been identified as fast sources of innovation and acquisition of innovative ideas. In this article however, we undertook an exploration of the subject of discourse for purposes of identifying significant parameters for analysis of the situation in organizations today.

The article thus explored studies including that carried out by this author to identify the norms at an individual level within the organization. Findings from such studies reveal that sources of innovative ideas at that level are Research and Development activities and more commonly, exposure to training activities in whatever form. And the belief is that acquisition of such innovative ideas is the panacea for systems improvement. However, it appears that innovators meet with stiff resistance particularly from superior officers who were not similarly opportuned. To ameliorate such a situation therefore, this article canvasses leadership support for the introduction of innovative ideas by ensuring that (i) superior officers are similarly exposed to sources of acquisition of innovative ideas as their subordinates; and (ii) creating opportunities for innovators to occupy leadership positions. In such circumstances, they would assist in diffusing such ideas down the line.

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