

## **A Philosophy of Administration**

**You cannot give a man responsibility and authority and keep it yourself – the delegation must be made real.**

Richard E McArdle

*At the time this article was written, Richard McArdle was the Executive Director of the National Institute for Public Affairs in Washington, DC. This article is an adaptation and condensation of a talk given to the Washington Seminar of the Fellows of the National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study in June 1961. At the time of the presentation the author was Chief of the US Forest Service.*

An institution such as the Cooperative Extension Service is not adequately described as patterns of organization, or carefully prepared regulations, or physical facilities such as offices, literature, visual aids, office equipment, or means of transportation. Such an organization is people. If Extension gets the right kind of people, helps them develop their potential abilities, gives them opportunities to use these abilities, and sees to it that they get a square deal, then the service will get its job done and done well. In saying this I do not intend to ignore organizational patterns or rules of procedure. Those are essential working tools. I am simply trying to put the emphasis on the craftsman and not on his tools.

In emphasizing people I am not talking exclusively about the bigger wheels of the organization – in a chain of gears some of the big wheels will not turn if a smaller one is not operating. An organization can operate as individuals and yet pull together as a unit if there is widespread understanding of the essentiality of each member of the organization, no matter what his title or wage scale. It is important that the dignity of the individual be recognized.

The attitude of an agency toward the individual probably has much to do with the attitude of the individual toward his job and toward his agency. People who work only for wages and with one eye on the clock, who are not genuinely enthusiastic about the work of their organization and the part they play in it, are not likely to create an organization of distinctive character. The relationship between agency and individual is a two-way street and any agency is largely a reflection of the people in it. The kind of work that we do and the kind of surroundings that most of us work in are additional contributing factors of some significance. It is not easy to describe these influences adequately in a few words. Any normal person is going to be influenced by the knowledge that what he does is important to his fellow citizens.

Most people in an organization such as the Extension Service work alone or in small groups and are obliged to be self-reliant and to have confidence in themselves. Such people must also have confidence and faith in their fellow workers because there are times when success depends on what someone else does or does not do. All such

considerations have something to do with the kind of organization people collectively want.

Every agency needs some philosophy that goes beyond its legal charter. For example, nearly every decision should be consciously or unconsciously influenced by a desire to obtain the greatest good for the greatest number in the long run. This means thinking always of the permanent good of the whole people and not of temporary benefit to individuals or groups. This is one way of defining public interest. These philosophies are not things that need to be talked about very much but they do shape an agency's attitudes and character. Such philosophies, however, may be more responsible for what an organization is than the policies and procedures spelled out in administrative manuals.

A big organization must avoid the evils that often come with bigness—such as arbitrary actions, complacency, indifference, less personal contact, more tendency toward centralization with fewer decisions at the place where decisions take effect. To handle a greatly increased workload and a wider variety of obligations, an organization must become larger. In becoming larger it becomes more complex. Leaders capable of meeting these expanding responsibilities must be developed. With expanding responsibilities the environment changes and, increasingly, conditions with which predecessors never had to deal must be met.

Often such conditions are beyond control. These circumstances can have an appreciable effect on many new people given larger and more difficult responsibilities at earlier stages in their careers. One result could be that men out at the end of the line will play it safe, make their decisions by the book and become more interested in the clock and the calendar than in the people they serve. Such evils do not necessarily befall an organization, but they could. They must be guarded against.

To preserve its basic character, an organization must be determined to shoot always for a high mark—for individual self-reliance coupled with ability to work as part of a team, for acceptance of responsibility, for excellence in technical competence—always with a conviction that individual jobs and the job of the agency are the most worthwhile of any anywhere. It is not easy to do this, but the goal is worth working for.

The most realistic approach to communicating a philosophy of administration is to make it specific to some situation. Perhaps this can be done by talking about the US Forest Service—the agency I know most about. Even though my examples are taken from this particular agency, the philosophy applies to any institution operating in the public interest and at any level of management or leadership.

## OBJECTIVES

One of the things you need to do to get people pulling in the same direction is to make sure everyone knows the organization's objectives. Each person must know the objectives of his particular unit and how his unit fits into the agency and how his own job fits into the rest of the agency. This is especially important in the Forest Service because

it is a highly decentralized organization. All of the actions and decisions are not taken in Washington. A great deal of the responsibility and authority which has been delegated to the Chief by the Secretary of Agriculture is re-delegated, and in turn is again re-delegated, and perhaps again re-delegated.

## DECENTRALIZATION

Decentralization is a characteristic of the Forest Service. In a decentralized organization, you must delegate both authority and responsibility and you must make the delegation real. You cannot give a man authority and responsibility and keep it yourself. It means that he can make decisions without your second-guessing for him or making prior review of his decisions. He may make mistakes but he will not be doing it deliberately or maliciously.

For example, as Chief of the Forest Service, if I had happened on a good-sized fire in one of our national forests, I would probably have found the District Ranger in charge. He is the tail-end of our line of command, but if the fire is big enough to require the Ranger to be in on it, he is boss. He could put me to work; he could tell me what to do and I would have to do it. The Forest Supervisor, the Regional Forester, and the Chief of the Forest Service are the only three men who can remove that Ranger from being in charge of that fire, but as long as he is in charge, he is boss and is expected to operate that way. He does not look to his superiors when he makes a decision to say, "Is that right?" He is expected to take his job and run it. You can not delegate responsibility and authority and still keep it.

### *Delegating Authority*

There must be a clear-cut understanding of what is delegated. If a man does not know what he is supposed to do, how can he do it? You must spell out at least the limits of what you are delegating. For example, with the Forest Service a District Forest Ranger can make a small-sized timber sale but he can not issue a grazing permit. A Forest Supervisor may issue a grazing permit—that responsibility is delegated to him and he does not re-delegate it to the Ranger. The Forest Supervisor of a national forest in western Oregon may sell 10 million board feet of timber without approval higher up. The Regional Forester in Portland, Oregon, who has charge of all Washington and Oregon national forests, may sell 50 million board feet of timber without asking permission. If it is over 50 million feet he refers it to the office of the Chief. The Regional Forester in Atlanta, Georgia, however, where things are different, may sell only 10 million feet of timber without referring the sale to Washington. The point is that when you delegate authority and responsibility, you and the person to whom you have delegated them must each understand how far he may go and how far he may not go. You must put up some fences around your delegation even when you leave a lot of room inside the fence.

### *Accepting Responsibility*

Another essential in making decentralization work is that people accept responsibility, and I mean *accept*, not *except*. It does not do any good to delegate responsibility and authority if decisions are not going to be made or if they are going to be delayed or bucked back up the line. Give a man responsibility and make him take it.

Many years ago, when I was just starting in the Forest Service, there was a rash of fires where I was stationed. It got to be more than we could handle; everybody was really loaded. They got to a desperate stage and the Forest Supervisor asked me to take a fire crew of some 100 men back in the hills to handle a new fire that had just been reported. He was bogged down with far too many fires. He may not have had any sleep for several days. (We would not put an inexperienced man in charge of a fire crew today but we were not so practical then). I started out with this group of men and saw a tremendous column of black smoke coming up. I got stage fright and called the Supervisor: "You told me to take these men up there and control that fire. What do I do?" I still remember his tired voice as he said, "I don't know Mac, it's your fire!"

What I have said so far boils down to something like this; to make an organization operate as a cohesive unit, everybody in it must know what the outfit is aiming for, he must know where he fits in, and what he is expected to do. An organization can force this knowledge and understanding on him. You can write it out in a handbook or manual and give it to all personnel. You can have an examination and grade them on how well they understand the objectives of the organization and of their part of the organization, what each person's job is, and what you expect him to do. You can force this knowledge and understanding but you still will not necessarily get a good running outfit. You will likely not get it anyway if you force it. You have to constantly remember that agency administration is really people administration. The basic question is how do you get people to want to achieve the objectives of the organization, not in a perfunctory fashion but in giving the job all they have to offer.

### *Making Decisions*

I have some suggestions; first, and perhaps foremost, try to give real responsibility to people. People like to feel important. But that is not the significant thing; these people must realize they have a place of importance and value in running the organization. This feeling of importance and of responsibility must be real and not just on paper or perfunctory. Let people participate in deciding on objectives, policies, programs, and procedures. If a person participates he will be much more likely to consider that these are also his programs, policies, objectives and procedures. I am not talking about "voting" on decisions—the boss can not walk away from his own responsibility. But he can give those who are affected by his decisions a chance to recommend and be consulted.

When the Forest Service is about to identify a new program, objective, policy, or procedure, something like this is done: Recommendations and suggestions are sought from all appropriate people. For example, the Regional Forest and Experiment Station Directors may be consulted. They, in turn, may ask their top people who may consult with others. I do not mean that seeking advice on policy or procedure goes out to the

furthermost twig to take the opinion of the newest casual laborer just hired. But our responsible people back along the line are asked what they think of the proposal; their opinions are given real consideration. This is not perfunctory and Forest Service people know it, so at least they have their day in court even though the final decision may not be just what they would like.

This final decision has to be accepted, of course, and we learn to accept decisions. To illustrate, let's assume that a forest fire goes off across the hills. The fire boss gets his foremen together and says, "What should we do, how will we get on top of this job?" Depending on how many foremen he has, he may get a half dozen suggestions on where to put the fire line. After he hears all of the advice, he makes a decision—we will do it this way—and all have to accept this decision. If they don't work together, they may get burned up. Forest Service people know that accepting decisions is part of the job.

## EVALUATING PERFORMANCE

Another essential philosophy of management is to recognize good work as well as to be critical of poor work. This is why the Forest Service makes inspections. If you are going to decentralize by delegating authority and responsibility, you must have inspections (supervise) to see whether or not your delegations of authority have been abused and whether your delegations of responsibility have been redeemed. Inspections should recognize good work as well as failures. Inspections in the Forest Service are used as training devices as much as anything else. The Chief delegates a part of his responsibility to Regional Foresters. The Chief is still responsible to the Secretary of Agriculture, but Regional Foresters take part of the Chief's responsibility. So the Chief has an interest in how well the Regional Foresters are doing. A Regional Forester, in turn, may delegate part of his responsibility to the Forest Supervisor. When he inspects the supervisor he is, in effect, inspecting himself.

Inspection is a joint affair in the Forest Service. It is not a private-eye investigation, an attempt to find only wrongdoing, but the major purpose of inspections is to see whether or not the objectives of the agency are being worked at and how well. In this way, everyone can have a chance to suggest better ways of doing the job. Another thing; everyone should know that he can come into the office of the person next higher up the line, or all the way up the line if he wants to, and say what he has to say. It is his organization and he ought to feel that he has a real part in running it.

The people of any agency ought to know, too, that the boss will go to bat for them if they are in the right and that they will get a square deal. Some of these things I am mentioning all too hastily are often more important than grades, or job titles, or the amount of money they get. And especially, the people in an agency must have confidence in their leaders—in their leader's integrity.

## CONCLUSION

When you ask me what makes the Forest Service tick I could say I do not know. I really do know but it is difficult to spell it out so that someone else would get what I'm driving at. The best that I can do is give you this general flavor and not any hard and fast rules. I have tried to toss out a few helpful hints on hard and fast rules—but hard and fast rules are not what make an agency work; they are just useful tools. The Forest Service is people and the Chief is just one of them.