Bureaucratic Theory

[Max Weber]

The term 'bureaucracy' is often used in a negative sense (e.g. red tape, officialdom). However, it actually refers to a specific form of organization with certain characteristics. The concept of bureaucracy and bureaucratic organization was first put forward systematically by the German academic and socialist, Max Weber (1864-1920). He propounded the bureaucratic theory of organization as the most dominant and a universal model of organization that exists to a greater extent in both private and public sectors even today.

Max Weber (1864-1920)

Max Weber was born in Germany in 1964 and a contemporary of Taylor and Fayol, the two classical theorists. Unlike them, German social scientist Weber was not a practicing manager and his contribution to classical administrative theory appeared from a different perspective. He studied, observed and theorized about many forms of social organizations and managing human society. His most influential work entitled 'The Theory of Social and Economic Organization' published in 1920 (later translated into English in 1947) is considered to be a landmark in public administration. It was in this publication that the term 'bureaucracy' was used to describe the rational form of organization. He described bureaucratic organization as the most rational means for managing human society and control over human beings. He is regarded as the father of bureaucratic theory. His work has a great influence on modern social system/sociology.

In his analysis of social systems, he identified that each social system was maintained by the interaction of three related concepts: power, authority and legitimacy.

Power: it is exercised by coercion. Power enables one person or a ruler to use force to another.

Authority: it has a system of beliefs that gives the ruler or a person the right to issue the order and gives the followers the duty to obey it without questioning. [Authority implies acceptance of rule by those over whom it is to be exercised]

Authority / domination: it refers to a power relationship between the rulers and the ruled/people. Authority is exercised over a large number of people/administrative staff.

Legitimacy: If individuals in a society or in an organization memorize that the power held by the ruler is right and acceptable, it legitimizes the exercise of authority.

Weber sought to identify the reasons why individuals act in certain ways in an organization and why they obey those in authority over them. He found that people

obey those in authority because of the influence of three types of legitimate authority. In other words, Weber identified and described three types of authority structures and the system of belief by which any authority is legitimated.

Traditional authority: traditional authority rests on the beliefs, traditions and customs. Individuals obey the authority because of their traditions or customs. A person enjoys personal authority by virtue of their inherited / inborn status. Similarly, individuals obey the authority because of their faith, tradition and custom related to the person.

Administrative apparatus in this kind of authority consists of the personal relatives, favorites, and servants.

Charismatic authority: This type of authority is legitimated on the belief that authority has some kind of magical or gifted power. Legitimacy in authority arises from loyalty to, confidence in and personal qualities of the person/ruler.

Administrative apparatus or authority structure in this type of authority is very loose and unstable and consists of faithful followers.

Rational-legal authority: Rational legal authority is not owed to anyone personally rather rests on the rationally enacted laws, rules and regulations that specify the rules that individuals should obey. The authority arises because of the office or position of the person in authority. The person in authority is bounded/ restricted by the rules, regulations and procedures of the organization. Subordinates obey the authority of superior because the superior has legal authority.]

Weber's Model of Bureaucracy

According to Weber, all three types of authority have legitimacy and individuals obey them. Out of the three types of authority, Weber preferred the rational legal type of authority because its structure is the most modern structure of social organization and exists in most organizations today. Weber termed this form of organization *bureaucracy*. Weber didn't define bureaucracy. He only described its characteristics. According to him, bureaucracy refers to *'an administrative body of appointed officials'*. The main characteristics of bureaucracy or a bureaucratic organization, according to Weber are as follows.

a. *A clear-cut division of labor* which makes it possible to employ specialists to carry out specific official duties.

b. *A clearly defined hierarchy of offices* (A pyramid like structure with each lower office/official under the control of a higher one)

c. Offices or posts are filled through a *free contractual agreement*. [Officials are appointed on the basis of contract]

d. Officials are selected on the basis of *professional qualification* and technical competence.

e. Functions/ *duties of the offices and officials* are clearly specified.

f. Written *rules and regulations* for carrying out assigned tasks which are to be applied uniformly.

g. Officials are paid/ remunerated by a *fixed salary* in money with the right to a pension. The salary is graded according to position in the hierarchy.

h. The officials should conduct their duties in a spirit of *impersonality*. They should not show any fear or favor in a relationship with both inside (other officials) and outside the organization (public)

i. There is a *career structure* and promotion is possible by seniority or merit or according to the judgment of superiors.

k. The office/position is treated as the sole or at least the *primary occupation* of the officials (career service).

Ideal-Type Bureaucracy

Weber emphasized the ideal type bureaucracy as the most efficient form of organization or administrative structure for goal accomplishment. The essential characteristics of ideal- type of bureaucratic organization are as follows.

- *Impersonal order (impersonal relationship within or outside the office)*

- *Clear hierarchy or chain of command (hierarchical authority)*

- *Clear division of labor based on specialized skills and technical competence*

- *Formal or written rules and regulations of operations*

- *Merit based recruitment and advancement of officials*

- *Keeping of files and records for administrative actions/ Written documents*

- *Formal and task oriented communications*

- *Personal and public ends (separation of administrative officials from the ownership of the means of administration*

Weber conceptualized that when an organization operates in accordance with the above characteristics, it can be termed as ideal bureaucracy, the most efficient form for an organization.

German Sociologist Max Weber developed another important classical theory known as theory of bureaucracy. Weber's bureaucratic model is regarded as a distinctive contribution to the literature on public administration. Weber was not practicing administrative thinker. He developed the theory from a historical perspective and his own observation about the management of organization from outside. He did not passionately advocate his theory. However, he postulated the view that organizations that are structured on bureaucratic principles are likely to achieve the highest level of efficiency. Despite some of weaknesses, bureaucratic model/structure has persisted as the organizational structure in the large scale organizations and public organizations over several decades.

Limitations of Classical Theories

Classical theories focused on formal structure, efficiency and productivity of the organization and largely ignored human and social factors within an organization. They were criticized for taking a mechanistic view of organization. They upheld the view that there are certain administrative principles and techniques that can be used in any type of organization for effective performance. They took human beings and human elements in the organization as an inert instrument performing the tasks assigned to them. They largely ignored the psychological, sociological and informal organizations within a formal organization and their influences on productivity and efficiency of workers. As a result, human relation theory emerged to address these weaknesses of classical theories: the scientific management, management theory and the bureaucratic theory.