4 Max Weber and the Idea of Bureaucracy

Introduction

1. ‘Bureaucracy’ is a term with several meanings, and this has led to genuine misconceptions about what it truly means. The most common meanings are as follows:
   - Bureaucracy is ‘red tape’, i.e., an excess of paperwork and rules leading to gross inefficiency. This is the pejorative sense of the word.
   - Bureaucracy is ‘officialdom’, i.e., all the apparatus of central and local government. This is a similar meaning to red tape.
   - Bureaucracy is an organisational form with certain dominant characteristics, such as a hierarchy of authority and a system of rules.

2. In this chapter the term ‘bureaucracy’ is interpreted as an organisational form. The object of the chapter is to describe and discuss this important and all-pervading form of organisation, with particular reference to the fundamental work of Max Weber.

Max Weber

3. Max Weber (1864–1920) spanned the same period of history as those early pioneers of management thought, Fayol and Taylor, to whom we have already referred. Unlike them, however, Weber was an academic – a sociologist – and not a practising manager. His interest in organisations was from the point of view of their authority structures. He wanted to find out why people in organisations obeyed those in authority over them. The observations and conclusions from his studies were first published in translation from the original German in 1947. It was in this publication that the term ‘bureaucracy’ was used to describe a rational form of organisation that today exists to a greater or lesser extent in practically every business and public enterprise.

4. In his analysis of organisations, Weber identified three basic types of legitimate authority: traditional, charismatic and rational-legal authority. Before describing these, it will be helpful to understand what he meant by the expression ‘legitimate authority’. Firstly, the concept of authority has to be distinguished from that of power. Power is a unilateral thing – it enables one person to force another to behave in a certain way, whether by means of strength or by rewards. Authority, on the other hand, implies acceptance of rule by those over whom it is to be exercised. It implies that power may
only be exercised within limits agreeable to subordinates. It is this latter situation to which Weber refers when he talks about legitimate authority.

5. The three types of legitimate authority described by him can be summarised as follows:
   - **Traditional authority** – where acceptance of those in authority arises from tradition and custom (e.g., as in monarchies, tribal hierarchies etc).
   - **Charismatic authority** – where acceptance arises from loyalty to, and confidence in, the personal qualities of the ruler.
   - **Rational-legal authority** – where acceptance arises out of the office, or position, of the person in authority, as bounded by the rules and procedures of the organisation.

It is this last-mentioned form of authority which exists in most organisations today, and this is the form to which Weber ascribed the term ‘bureaucracy’.

**Bureaucracy**

6. The main features of a bureaucracy, according to Weber, are as follows:
   - A continuous organisation of functions bound by rules.
   - Specified spheres of competence, i.e., the specialisation of work, the degree of authority allocated and the rules governing the exercise of authority.
   - A hierarchical arrangement of offices (jobs), i.e., where one level of jobs is subject to control by the next higher level.
   - Appointment to offices are made on grounds of technical competence.
   - The separation of officials from the ownership of the organisation.
   - Official positions exist in their own right, and job holders have no rights to a particular position.
   - Rules, decisions and actions are formulated and recorded in writing.

7. The above features of bureaucratic organisation enable the authority of officials to be subject to published rules and practices. Thus authority is legitimate, not arbitrary. It is this point more than any other which caused Weber to comment that bureaucratic organisation was capable of attaining the highest degree of efficiency and was, in that sense, the most rational known means of carrying out ‘imperative control over human beings’.

8. Weber felt that bureaucracy was indispensable for the needs of large-scale organisation, and there is no doubt that this form of organisation has been adopted in one way or another by practically every enterprise of any size the world over. The two most significant factors in the growth of bureaucratic forms of organisation are undoubtedly size and complexity. Once an organisation begins to grow, the amount of specialisation increases, which usually leads to an increase in job levels. New jobs are created and old jobs redefined. Recruitment from outside becomes more important. Relationships, authority boundaries and discipline generally have to be regulated. Questions of control and coordination became all-important. Thus a small, relatively informal, family concern can suddenly grow into quite a different organisation requiring new skills and new attitudes from its proprietors.

9. Although size almost inevitably implies complexity, there are also issues of complexity for smaller organisations. These can arise out of the requirements of sophisticated modern technology, for example. In such an environment specialised and up-to-date skills are required, the span of control has to be small, questions of quality control are
vital and last, but by no means least, a keen eye needs to be kept on the competition. Add to all these points the rules and regulations of governments and supranational bodies, such as the European Union and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and the result is a highly complex environment, which can only be controlled in a systematic form of organisation. Indeed, one of the challenges to modern managements is to maintain a ‘lean’ organisation in such circumstances.

Bureaucracy after Weber

9. Weber’s contribution to our understanding of formal organisation structures has been a major one. No subsequent discussion or debate on this topic has been possible without reference to his basic analysis of bureaucratic organisation. Nevertheless, without disputing the basic proposition that bureaucracy is the most efficient means of organising for the achievement of formal goals, several researchers since Weber have established important weaknesses in the bureaucratic model. These researchers have identified a number of awkward side-effects or ‘dysfunctions’ of bureaucracy. These can be summarised as follows:

1. Rules, originally designed to serve organisational efficiency, have a tendency to become all-important in their own right.

2. Relationships between office-holders or roles are based on the rights and duties of each role, i.e., they are depersonalised, and this leads to rigid behaviour (predictability).

3. Decision-making tends to be categorised, i.e., choices are previously programmed and this discourages the search for further alternatives, another form of rigidity.

4. The effects of rigid behaviour are often very damaging for client or customer relations and also for management–worker relationships; customers are unable to obtain tailor-made services, but have to accept standardisation; employees have to work within a framework of rules and controls which has been more or less imposed on them.

5. Standardisation and routine procedures make change and adaptation difficult when circumstances change.

6. The exercise of ‘control based on knowledge’, as advocated by Weber, has led to the growth of experts, whose opinions and attitudes may frequently clash with those of the generalist managers and supervisors.