Chapter 12 - Structure and control in organizations

Answers to end of chapter questions

1. What are the features of Weber's model of bureaucracy and what are the criticisms of it?

Max Weber, whose study of bureaucracy has had an enormous influence on the theory of organizations and on how we understand the impact of organizations in society at large. Weber wrote during the years spanning the turn of the nineteenth century, towards the end of the period when the modern German nation became consolidated. Unlike the pattern of industrialization in Britain, the German industrial economy developed along centralized lines, and one aspect of this was the growth of a huge state apparatus. It was the experience of seeing this central state machine develop and spread that persuaded Weber of the varied implications of the bureaucratic form of organization.

The bureaucratic model

In Weber's (1970) account of bureaucracy the following basic elements were included:

- **A staff** consisting of a body of employees whose full-time work was to administer the activities of the institution. As well as simply a body of people, this also consists of a structure of 'offices’ such that the employee’s post carries authority over specific areas, but it is a cardinal principle that the incumbent should not overstep the bounds of the authority of the office. Such behaviour (for example, the use of formal authority to gain wider influence) might result in various forms of corruption.

- **A division of labour** which assigns specific tasks to sub-units and individuals. The division of labour in bureaucracies is highly developed: departmental boundaries and individual jobs are closely specified and duties and responsibilities carefully set out.

- **The hierarchy**, or division of power, involves the ranking of offices to provide clear lines of command. In bureaucracies the hierarchy also is typically very complex, its many levels providing a highly differentiated structure of authority.

- **Competence** refers to the basis upon which office is held. Factors like luck, favouritism or personal connections should play no part in the position that officials attain; advancement should be decided by expertise and ability alone. Thus, organizations have to pay close attention to the process of selection, whereby these qualities can be identified in personnel.

- **Objectivity** suggests that all dealings within the bureaucracy and with clients should be conducted on the basis of equal treatment according to a procedural routine. The objective conduct of business, free from any personal feelings, is the basis of the reliability of formal administration. A more obvious meaning of bureaucracy, however, presents a problem with Weber's account, namely that his model has always seemed at odds with common sense notions. ‘Bureaucracy’ in every day terms usually means the exact opposite of the highly rational and efficient system that Weber seemed to
The popular view of bureaucracy conjures up an image of unnecessary paperwork, time-consuming procedure, strict adherence to rules, petty-minded officialdom, and unresponsiveness to clients. This more critical, common-sense view has formed the basis of a lengthy ‘debate with Weber’ in which a great deal of modern writing and research has been cast. Later writers stressed various ‘dysfunctional’ features and the rigid and impersonal character of bureaucracy, contrasting this with the perfect form of administration that Weber appeared to be describing.

2. To what extent do the widespread criticisms of Weber do him justice?

It now tends to be recognized, however, that these criticisms of the nature of bureaucracy were misjudged as criticisms of Weber. In terms of the managerial criticism, this is probably at least partly true. Weber did regard bureaucracies as an efficient and effective form of administration, which is certainly at odds with the images of inflexible, bureaucratic organizations. Certainly many modern organizations have rejected the bureaucratic model, and have developed much more versatile and variable designs. For good or ill, many organizations are still bureaucratic, and bureaucracy as a structural design survives remarkably well in contemporary times.

Values of objectivity and competence that bureaucracies incorporate, and that we tend to take for granted, help to guarantee integrity in economic and public life. Also, when assessing the bureaucratic model, it is important to take a broader comparative and historical viewpoint. Weber, it must be remembered, was writing at a particular point in time. Partly he had in mind the historical past, when organizations were often based on quite different rules, and it was normal for office holders to manipulate the privileges of position. Also, compared with organizations in countries where political factors intervene far more prominently, the bureaucracies we are familiar with often seem to be models of efficiency and fair dealing. Hence the emphasis on rationality and the fulfillment of contractual obligations often form our first impressions of bureaucracy, as Weber intended they should.

3. What do you understand to be the relationship between formal and informal organization?

A formal organization is one which is a bureaucracy. It has rules and regulations which shape the way in which people work and the organization functions. An informal organization has less rules and ‘layers’ with greater room for autonomy. Informal structure includes all of the subtle customs and attitudes, the expectations and unwritten rules that stamp an organization with a specific character or culture. These may involve general patterns like the degree of formality of behaviour that is expected, the deference to those in authority, and the autonomy that people normally have in their work.
4. **What do you understand as the ‘insidious’ nature of modern power systems?**

In modern systems the insidiousness can arise from more covert methods of power and control such as cultures and internalization of company missions and values.

5. **Discuss the ways in which more recent writers (Goffman, Foucault, Ritzer) have interpreted the new forms of organizational power.**

Recent writers have interpreted new forms of organizational power as a hidden form of control. They have forwarded theories of disciplinary power. Links can be drawn to modern systems of surveillance, such as new technologies and work systems that automatically record employees’ movements.

6. **What is the critique of modern cultural patterns that the McDonaldization thesis offers?**

McDonaldization means that the business principles pioneered by McDonald’s are increasingly dominating other industries and activities, like the media, health, and leisure, as well as activities like sport and politics. A wide array of social phenomena are linked under the broad heading of McDonaldization. Some have been directly affected by the principle of the fast-food restaurant, whereas in other cases the effect is more indirect. Some have all the dimensions of McDonaldization, but others may have only one or two. In any case, they all are part of what Weber called the rationalization process and what is here, in order to make Weber more timely, labelled McDonaldization. (Ritzer, 1993, p. xiii). McDonaldized industries continue the same basic processes of standardization and rationalization that systems like Taylorism, Fordism, and the assembly line established.

7. **Does the control of a managerial labour force differ from that of groups of manual and white-collar workers?**

Not in modern work organizations as the forms of control are so dispersed and far reaching that these more ‘subjective’ methods of control affect all members of an organization.