

IN GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT

By Admiral Hyman Rickover

Author's Note:

The following article has been provided in response to a request. I have written it reluctantly, for I realize the futility of expecting that articles such as this will have any impact.

I am convinced it is impossible to "teach" management in schools, in books, or in articles such as this. I am reminded of the high-ranking military officer who, a number of years ago, had been appointed to head a major Federal Agency in Washington. He advised me he would be in Washington soon and would like to visit me for half an hour to learn how to run a large organization. I told him he could not learn to be king in half an hour, and not to waste his precious time seeing me. The vast majority of readers, those who "believe," or "hope" or who have been "taught" that there are a few simple principles of management which can be learned, will find my thoughts unconvincing, prosaic, or dated. Perhaps the few who already "know" how to manage or who recognize that the necessary skills can only be developed by long personal experience and hard work, and will take some heart from reading my comments amidst the flood of modern "management double-speak" so prevalent today.

Today the American people have little trust in those who work for the Federal Government. To an extent this lack of confidence is justified, particularly when it involves senior managers. Since the end of World War II the number of high grade civilians in relation to the total Government workforce has steadily increased to the point where we have more managers and checkers than we have doers. This increase has been brought about by the purveyors of the "techniques of modern management." Our senior employees have been schooled in this "new" philosophy which holds that as long as a person is well-versed in the few simple rules of how to handle people and situations, he need not know anything about the details of the programs he is managing or the increasingly sophisticated technologies on which many of these programs are based. This has allowed the non-professional to achieve high status and high pay within the Government. These "managers" can move easily from one position to another without the slightest pause. As long as their areas do not become a public disaster they are safe. If trouble erupts, they are lost; they can then blame those beneath them or those who preceded them. Until this false concept is rooted out of the Federal Government we cannot expect the American people to regain their trust. In deed they should not.

I do not hold much hope for this being done before a major disaster befalls the U.S. But I can provide some basic principles for doing a job that I have followed for over 50 years of government service and which I have instilled in my senior managers. If these principles were emphasized instead of the present ones, it would go a long way toward reversing the current trend. Unfortunately, many of those who have been brought up in the "new management" system will probably never understand the significance of the principles I offer.

1. Ownership

A person doing a job—any job—must feel that he owns it and that he will remain on that job indefinitely. If he feels he is a temporary custodian, or is using the job as a stepping stone to a higher position, his actions will probably not take into account the long-term interests of the country. Lack of commitment to the present job will be perceived to those who work for him and they also will tend not to care. If he feels he owns his job and acts accordingly, he need not worry about his next job. He should exercise a devotion to his work as if his children were the direct beneficiaries of what he is doing, as indeed they are. Too many spend their entire lives looking for the next job. We need to make it challenging and rewarding for managers to remain in one organization for more than a few years. Thereby the organization will benefit from their knowledge, experience, and “corporate” memory.

2. Responsibility

Along with ownership comes the need for acceptance of full responsibility for the work. It is now common in government to deal with problems in a collective way. For example, a program will be divided into component parts or into sub-programs, but with no one responsible for the entire effort. Another approach is to have a committee run the program in some pseudo-democratic form, or to establish more and more levels of managers to theoretically give better control. All of these are but different forms of shared responsibility, and shared responsibility means that no one is responsible. Unless the one person truly responsible can be identified when something goes wrong, then no one has been really responsible.

3. Attention to Detail

A tendency among managers, particularly as they move to higher positions, is to think they no longer need to be concerned with details. If the boss is not concerned about details, his subordinates also will not consider them important. Yet “the devil is in the details.” It is hard, monotonous, and onerous to pay attention to details; most managers would rather focus on lofty policy matters. But when details are ignored, the project fails; no infusion of policy or lofty ideals can then correct the situation. This principle is particularly important in those programs where the application of special skills or technology is needed for success.

4. Priorities

The need to pay attention to details does not mean that you should do everything. Any individual has only so much time to work, with an absolute limit of 24 hours each day. If you are to manage your job you must set priorities. Too many people let the job set the priorities. On any given day, small, unimportant but seemingly “interesting” trivia pass through an office; you must avoid letting these monopolize your time. A tendency of human beings is to while away time with unimportant matters because these do not require mental effort or energy. That is why television is popular. You must apply self-discipline to ensure your energy is focused on where it is most needed.

5. Know what is going on

You must establish simple and direct means to find out what is going on in detail in the area of your responsibility. There are ways of doing this, but all involve constant drudgery. For this reason, most managers avoid keeping up with the details. Instead they create “management information systems.” Gimmicks such as these merely demonstrate you are not able or willing to use the necessary effort on your job. I require regular, periodic reports directly to me from key personnel through out my program. I insist that they report the problems they have found in plain English, and that they report the specific action they are taking, and what assistance they need from me. The concept that the use of complex systems can simplify matters is specious. It may sound attractive but it flies in the face of nature's laws, as I have observed them.

6. Hard Work

For this there is no substitute. A manager who does not work hard or devote extra effort cannot expect his people to do so. You must set the example. Hard work compensates for many shortcomings. You may not be the smartest or most knowledgeable person. But if you dedicate yourself to the job and put in the required effort, your people will follow your lead.

7. Checking up

An essential element of carrying out my work is the need to have it checked by an independent source. Even the most dedicated individual makes mistakes. Further, many are less than fully dedicated to their work. In industry an independent check is usually referred to as “quality control” and is widely used in engineering applications. But the concept is valid for more than just engineering. Much poor work and sheer nonsense is generated in government because it is not subjected to impartial review and oversight.

8. Formality

A corollary of the concept of checking work is in the need for formalizing communications and actions. If this is not done, then one is dependent on individual memory which is quickly lost as people leave or move to other jobs. In my work an invaluable feature has been the ability to go back a number of years to determine the basis for an action. In this way an emerging problem can be put into proper perspective, and can facilitate taking the action needed for correction. If actions are not formalized, one can never be sure they are understood or executed.

9. Facing the Facts

Another principle for managing a successful program is to resist the natural human inclination to hope things will work out, despite evidence or doubt to the contrary. This may seem obvious, but it is a factor one must be conscious of and actively guard against. It can have a subtle effect, particularly if the manager has spent much time and energy on a project and has come to feel possessive about it. It is not easy to admit that what you thought was correct did not turn out that way.

If conditions require it, one must face the facts and brutally make needed changes despite considerable costs and schedule delays. The man in charge must personally set the example in this area and require subordinates to do likewise. Figuratively, he must, if necessary, kill his own child, regardless of the consequences to himself. After all, he is the trustee for the Government; he is not the owner.

The principles I have stated may have many ancillary facets that can be further developed. I have merely provided the key elements. I suspect most of those reading this article will give passing acknowledgement and may even agree with the principles. But unless tangible action is taken to put them into practice, they have been of no merit. There is a desperate need in Government for responsible management; for managers who pay attention to substance and not to glib “management techniques.” If there continues to be little movement toward more responsible and effective management along the line I have outlined, it should come as no surprise if the “taxpayers revolt” takes on an increasingly tangible form which extends even into the Federal Government.

Reprinted from MANAGEMENT, September 1979