

Behaving like Adults

Fred Schindler

Editor, MicroBusiness Column

Bureaucracy is inevitable. With time, any organization will put a bureaucracy in place. It will reduce efficiency and even encourage bad decisions. Similarly, politics are inevitable. With time, any group of people will embrace political allegiances and behaviors. Politics and bureaucracy aren't the same thing, but they are cousins that collaborate impact our workplaces.

I used to work for a CTO that told us that he expected us to "behave like adults." This was his way of saying that he expected us to do the right thing for the organization, not what politics motivated us to do or what the bureaucracy encouraged us to do. The right thing for the organization is not the necessarily the expedient thing, not necessarily the self-serving thing, and not necessarily the thing the system rewarded us to do. There are exceptions, but usually it's easy to decide what the right thing is.

Why do bureaucracies always appear? Bureaucracies limit the range of employee behavior, they establish and maintain systems that limit what can be done and how things can be done. In part, bureaucracies are necessary – there are regulations and processes that need to be understood and followed.

Bureaucracies attempt to control what is necessary and what seems to be necessary. The problem is that what seems to be necessary grows with time. Whenever a solitary employee does something wrong, there is a temptation to put a mechanism in place to ensure it can never happen again. Bureaucracies believe that people need to be controlled and what they do needs to be constrained. In part, they are right.

People do misbehave, and bureaucracies respond to that. For example, very few organizations make cash available without any controls. Even though most people are trustworthy, some people steal, some people will be tempted, some people will borrow and forget. I don't think anyone would argue that cash should not be controlled and some level of documentation should not be required to have access to the cash.

Even reasonable procedures are susceptible to silliness. I used to be in an organization where we had to submit annual capital equipment requests, and assign an importance to each item on a scale of 1 to 10. This is a very reasonable requirement. But over the years we learned not to assign low numbers to anything we had any hope of purchasing. Eventually no one assigned a rating lower than 7. That made it more difficult to discriminate priorities. When we had a meeting with the division general manager to consolidate our lists I was amused that one of my colleagues rated his items to 3 significant digits. So I rated one of mine to 4 significant places.

That was mostly harmless, but bureaucratic procedures can do much worse. Many years ago I joined a new organization and was told that I would have \$50,000 spending authority. That made it sound like the organization had confidence in me to be responsible. But the bureaucracy apparently did not – every

purchase that I approved then required the signature of a low level financial analyst. When I approved a purchase of some capacitors valued at a few dollars, a financial analyst called me and said “an engineer in another group just ordered some capacitors, so you should be able to use some of them.” I’m sure she meant well, but she had no idea what a capacitor was. The inefficiency of this added step more than made up for any savings even if by some miracle we could use someone else’s capacitors.

Why does this happen? In this case it felt like a lack of trust. But in general it is because people sometimes make mistakes or misbehave. The bureaucracy responds by establishing a system that makes sure that this can never happen again. Since there is a wide range of errors that people can make, a bureaucracy can eventually become overwhelmingly inefficient. This is the scourge of large and long established companies. Sure, it makes it very difficult to do something wrong, but it also makes it very difficult do something right!

Politics can add another layer of inefficiency. It can start innocuously enough, as allegiances between like-minded people or people with similar background, or people with common objectives. The harm happens when people make decisions or take actions based on political considerations instead of business objectives.

And then there are always the people that play politics. While this is also more of an issue in large and established organizations, it can occur in even the smallest groups. I’d rather be judged on merit than who I know. I’d rather see decisions made on merit than political considerations.

Politics can create competition between groups in the same organization. Some competition can be healthy, it is motivating. But it’s a problem when groups within an organization are so preoccupied competing with one another that they lose sight of a threat from outside, from a real competitor. The business literature is rich with example of companies so dominated by infighting that the lost sight of their mission and lost business to their competitors.

I wish I had a meaningful conclusion, or useful guidance. I don’t. I worked in some large organizations dominated by bureaucracy and politics. Eventually I moved on. I worked for a very small company that was blissfully free of bureaucracy, but developed a stiflingly political atmosphere. Some people thrive in political climates, I moved on. The only guidance I can offer is to be aware, and try to behave like adults.

Fred Schindler (m.schindler@ieee.org) is with RF Micro Devices, Billerica, MA