

THE ROLE OF MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

GIVEN AS PART OF A LECTURE SERIES FOR  
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## PREFATORY REMARKS

Before today's lecture is presented, I hope you will bear with me for a few general comments. We, who are responsible for this lecture series, are wrestling with the problem as how best to make our remarks meaningful to you. Frankly, we are groping with the problem and believe perhaps some experimentation may be worthwhile.

Obviously, the problem would be facilitated if we could sit down with you in small groups which would permit free discussions and the use of techniques of proved effectiveness, such as the use of role-playing, dramas, and simulated situations. But with such a large group, such techniques are obviously impossible. Therefore, we are faced with this problem: Should we concentrate directly and exclusively on operational problems? For example, on the subject of communications, should we say that a good communication system requires: first, well-lighted bulletin boards with materials organized and kept up-to-date; second the use of simple, concise language; and so on (listing a dozen or so rules of those kinds, followed perhaps by a discussion of the precise manner and methods of making an audit or appraisal of a system of communication).

Or instead of taking up operational patterns, should we strive to impart a greater sense and general understanding of the administrative process from the managerial viewpoint? As busy administrators, perhaps you have had little time to read the great amount of studies on public administration which have appeared in recent years. Can we be of service in trying to apprise you of the substance of the latest ideas and thinking as expressed in studies from various parts of the world? Would such an approach be valuable in helping you to broaden your horizon and to think constructively on varying managerial problems?

Some of you rightly say that you have administrative problems which are peculiar to Vietnam and that you are now in a period of emergency. And you may want to know how the general thinking is applicable to Vietnam. At least in my opinion, I believe it would be presumptuous for us to speak with authority on such a subject. Nobody knows better than you, as experienced administrators acquainted with Vietnamese conditions and psychology, to what extent and in what ways the ideas, practices, and lessons of other countries are applicable here.

There are, however, recurring, universal managerial problems -- the kinds of problems which administrators all over the world discuss when they gather in large meetings of this kind and represent many diverse functional areas. Before deciding on the subjects for this series, we carefully examined the topics and contents of lectures given by practical administrators in numerous programs. We followed a typical, representative program. Our purpose is served if we can help you judge your own specific managerial problems in light of the trends, practices, and experiences of other countries and with a knowledge of the ideas and opinions of students and practitioners of administration from many lands.

In the lecture today, I shall comment generally about several selected aspects of middle management. After I have finished, I should like to adopt a device, to be explained later, by means of which you will have an opportunity to participate and express your own thinking and ideas as to the applicability of my remarks to Vietnam. Your collective thinking, I hope, will not only evoke some valuable ideas for yourselves and for us but also will arouse your interest in a problem vital to good government administration.

## MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

In any large organization there are three broad, general zones of management: (1) top management; (2) middle management; (3) and first line supervision. No sharp lines of distinction can be drawn between these levels of responsibility, and opinions as to which category a specific falls might well differ.

In general, however, it may be said that middle management refers to the intermediate echelons of management. In Vietnam, for example, middle management would cover a rather broad, though not necessarily rigid, span and would include, among others, the following: the directeurs généraux (who, however, may be considered as being in the twilight zone between top and middle management); chefs de services; chefs de bureau; and possibly (depending on who is making the classification) the chefs de sections. Middle management would also include the heads and principal officials of field establishments; managers of public institutions such as schools, hospitals, and eleemosynary establishments. Some writers would include, also, the heads of departmental staff agencies and departmental auxiliary (or housekeeping) services such as purchasing, personnel, budgetary, and accounting offices. Regardless, however, of whether or not such staff and auxiliary officials should be considered as middle managers, I am confining my remarks today to line officials, i.e., to those officials who are in the chain of command and carry out the basic functions for which governments exist.

Middle management is a critical sector in an administrative organization. It is middle management which is responsible for the planning of specific programs and the direction of government operations. As Professor Leonard D. White has said, middle management deals with matters "vital to good administration, calling for skill, fidelity, and capacity for leadership." It is with middle management that "the substantive action of government in behalf of citizens comes to fruition;... here it is that the spirit and temper of the public service and its reputation are largely made ... It is also a training ground from which a considerable part of top management emerges."

Indeed, experience has shown that middle management, if misdirected, can be an effective estoppel on democracy itself. I observed in the early post-war period in Japan such a sabotage of the democratic process by a bureaucracy which was out of tune with the policy making branches. The Japanese legislature would pass laws and the ministers would endeavor to carry them out, but old-time bureaucrats, still imbued with the spirit of authoritarianism and opposed to the new democratic reforms would twist, distort and thwart the popular will. A somewhat similar, though not nearly so serious, situation existed in Great Britain following World War II when the Labor Party came into power. The Labor Administration complained that key positions in the civil service were filled with members of the Conservative Party who hampered the efforts of ministers to activate the legislative program.

It is submitted that in a democratic society middle managers invariably should bow to the will of the people as expressed by their elected representatives in the legislature and as directed by a politically responsible executive. It is not within the province of middle managers to decide or change policies. Rather, it is their solemn duty to carry out faithfully and to the best of their abilities whatever policies the political branches decide, regardless of their own personal views to the contrary notwithstanding.

In spite of its importance to effective administration and even to the successful functioning of the democratic process, middle management has never received the attention which it deserves. Studies and analyses of the subject are rare. Moreover, administrative reforms have often neglected middle management and more

frequently have been directed to the task of strengthening top management, especially through the development of adequate central staff and auxiliary services. While this strengthening of top management and the development of staff and auxiliary agencies are essential, it has diverted attention from the less dramatic, but no less important, field of middle management.

Another reason why middle management has received so little consideration is the fact that in many countries (the United States being an example), middle management is not a recognized occupational grouping or category. I shall comment further on, and clarify, this point shortly. At this juncture, I merely wish to call attention to the fact that in many countries middle managers frequently reach their positions because of specialized competence in a particular division or subdivision and not because of their general managerial qualifications. In other words, middle managers are often considered primarily as functional specialists instead of members of a distinct class or group of managers.

In Vietnam I am happy to note the establishment and development of the National Institute of Administration as an indication of the awareness in this country of the need for selecting and preparing middle managers. Through its regular three-year degree program, its large evening school, its in-service training activities, its rapidly expanding library facilities in the field of government administration, its work in administrative research, and its other undertakings for the improvement of public administration, the Institute appears destined to play an increasingly prominent role in the advancement of middle management in Vietnam. I should like to express the earnest hope not only that the Institute continue to enlarge its present programs but also that other avenues for making middle management more effective be considered and explored. In this latter undertaking, you--who, for the most part, are middle managers--have the ability, the interest, and, I submit, the duty to your country, to contribute liberally.

One of the few studies of middle management in the United States was made in 1951 by a presidential committee, popularly known as the Reed Committee. This committee, among its recommendations, stated

". . . we think it would be helpful if the positions involving administrative duties were identified and carefully described in each department and agency, and if each department and agency made and kept current a list or inventory of persons who had demonstrated that they possessed administrative skill, with the personal and official history, present classification and other relevant data. We also believe that the continuous search for good prospective material for administration should be more definitely recognized in some departments . . . as a joint responsibility of supervisors and personnel officers . . ."

Thus, the Reed Committee, while not going so far as to recommend an occupational grouping for middle managers, emphasized the point that the public service could be measurably improved through greater efforts to insure that middle managers possess managerial qualifications.

The Reed Committee also commented on the operational outlook of middle managers. Middle managers, the committee said, often "suffer from an insularity which hampers their effective coordination as parts of a single whole." By that the committee meant that the vision of middle managers is frequently focused so closely on their relatively small domains that they develop a warped, distorted sense of importance of their agencies and their functions; and as a result, they tend to think largely in terms of the protection and welfare of their units and fail to recognize a

common responsibility to a common and single employer, the people as represented by the Legislature and the President.

According to Professors Fritz M. Marx and Henry Reining, Jr., the reasons for the narrow or insular outlook so often held by middle managers are twofold: (1) the size and (2) the functionalization of large-scale organizations. In their words, "Tied to a particular subdivision in a complex structure, the middle manager is apt to identify himself with the more tangible realities and objectives of his subdivision." Moreover, they point out that middle managers sometimes have difficulty in seeing themselves as parts of a managerial grouping rather than as parts of the technical specialties or professions within which they rose.

Now we are ready to consider the question: Should middle managers be primarily technicians or primarily managers? Should we recognize management per se in the intermediate levels of administration by creating, as the British have done, an occupational grouping of managers. There is no easy or universally accepted answer to the question (or questions). The answer may well depend on many factors, may vary among agencies or functions, or may depend upon the level of middle management.

Especially for the upper levels of middle management is there a good case for the proposition that middle managers should constitute an occupational grouping. In these levels, the tasks of the middle manager are largely administrative, that is, he devotes most of his time and energy to such managerial duties as planning, budgeting, organization, staffing, resolving disputes, directing, coordinating, reporting, following up decisions, and so forth. Many examples can be cited in which capable administrators have been eminently successful in directing varying functional fields to which they have been assigned. Though a manager needs to have an understanding of the function he directs, he can often acquire the sufficient essentials after assignment. Indeed, in the upper levels of middle management, the manager must supervise various technical functions and cannot be an expert in all; and certainly he should not have the narrow viewpoint of, nor represent the interests of, a single specialty. Rather, it would seem preferable for him to be a generalist with a good, though not necessarily technical, understanding and appreciation of the specific functions under his direction.

An occupational grouping of middle managers would undoubtedly have certain advantages. Especially if accompanied by a system of interfunctional and even interdepartmental transfers, such a grouping would, as Professor Marx has said, impart to middle managers a greater awareness of their general role. In his words, "managers would gain a wider vision and greater capacity for coordinative adjustments." Furthermore, as the same writer has pointed out, a career grouping of middle managers would facilitate an exchange of personnel between line and staff, thus promoting better line-staff understanding--an understanding which is, unfortunately, often lacking at present and which is greatly needed in administration.

Whatever may be the answer to the controversial question as to what extent middle managers should possess a technical knowledge of their functional field, one fact is clear. As the Reed Committee emphasized, they need to have managerial capacity in order to exercise effective leadership within their areas of supervision. They must be able to motivate and energize subordinates and to achieve teamwork in action. In short, they must be able, to use the words of Lawrence A. Appley, to get things done "through the efforts of other people." Since the subjects of leadership and supervision are taken up by other lecturers in this series, I shall not

discuss those topics now. However, I shall include some pertinent materials on the topic which you will find in the supplement to this lecture, a copy of which will be distributed to you at the close of today's meeting.

Effective middle management calls not only for capable management of a particular functional area. Middle managers also have the duty of coordinating and relating their actions to organization-wide aims and purposes. This, in turn, means a receptivity to the policy decisions of the top command and the coordination and collaboration with other middle managers.

For effective leadership and coordination, a good system of communications is essential. I am using the term "communications" in a broad sense to include telephonic and direct conversations, letters, news sheets, memoranda, reports, directives, consultations, conferences, committee meetings, bulletin boards, suggestion boxes---and even actions and attitudes which sometimes speak louder (and more accurately) than words.

Limitations of time preclude consideration of the essentials of an effective communications system. However, I should like to submit the general proposition that a good communication system should provide for three-way traffic: downward, upward, and horizontal (and one might even add "diagonal" as a fourth direction).

It is the duty of top management through downward communications to keep middle management informed of the over-all aims and goals of the organization. Middle management should be apprised, also, insofar as feasible, of the motivations, intentions, and reasons underlying the actions of top management. It is only by having an understanding of general aims and goals of the organization and the motives of top management that middle management will be in a position to make many decisions at their levels, thus relieving congestion at the top. Moreover, if middle managers have an understanding of general goals and motives, they will be better able to concentrate their energies on truly important matters; where middle management is ignorant of the aims of top management, minor matters are likely to assert themselves and to become magnified. Finally, by being cognizant of organizational aims and thinking, middle management can more readily be inventive and creative in fulfilling organizational purposes.

The effectiveness of middle management is further enhanced by a system of upward communications which permit that segment of management to participate in the formulation of plans and policies by top management. Since middle managers are familiar with the actual operations of government programs, they are in a good position to know what will work and what will not work; what is needed and what should be avoided. Therefore, plans and policies will be more realistic if they reflect the ideas of middle managers who must carry them out. Moreover, when their own thinking is embodied in plans and policies, middle managers are likely to carry them out with greater understanding and enthusiasm.

Parenthetically, it should be noted that the practice of keeping subordinates informed through downward communications and of giving them an opportunity through upward communications to participate in matters concerning their interests should apply not only to the relations between top and middle management. It is equally important, and for the same reasons, that two-way communications should characterize the relationships between middle managers and their subordinates.

Equally important with downward and upward communications to the effective functioning of middle management are horizontal communications. It is horizontal

communications which afford a means of coordinating the activities of various middle managers and of broadening their outlook. Since the subject of coordination will be discussed by other speakers, I shall comment only on the broadening of the outlook of middle managers through horizontal communications.

As Herbert A. Simon has shown, one of the many barriers to effective communications in an administrative organization is the "frame of reference" of the sender or recipient. Individuals and organizations often have "mental sets" or fixed patterns of thinking, which distort or color their perspective. The "mental set" may be caused by deeply ingrained habits, traditions, prejudices, absorption in a narrow speciality, or other factors. For example, an old-time navy man, who has reveled for many years in the glory of the battleship and accepted the theory of its invincibility, is slow to accept evidence of its vulnerability to new weapons. After the explosion of the first atomic bomb, it is interesting to note that the first reaction of a number of naval officers was to inform the press that atomic weapons did not challenge the supremacy of battleships and aircraft carriers. Or to use another example: Various agencies might interpret a certain problem regarding traffic accidents according to their respective backgrounds and functional specialities. The head of the traffic policemen might, for example, interpret the problem as calling for additional traffic personnel; the traffic engineering division and perhaps the department of public works might interpret the same facts primarily as calling for better, wider streets, more one way streets, signal lights, etc.; the safety engineers might think principally in terms of devising new mechanical safeguards (such as safety glass, better brakes, improved vision) for vehicles; the public relations people may want to seek a solution through an educational publicity campaign; and other groups would undoubtedly have other approaches.

Sometimes officials will make what Professor Simon calls an "appraisal of a situation", and then tend to discount facts which run counter to the appraisal -- an appraisal to which they have perhaps committed themselves and their organizations. For instance, at one point during the Korean War the higher levels of American intelligence became convinced that the Chinese Communists would not enter the war. Later, in spite of well validated facts which came from field sources to the contrary, the upper levels of intelligence refused to alter their stand. As we know, the results were almost disastrous.

Just as the frame of reference limits an individual's or an organization's perception of communications, just so a good system of communications may result in a broadening of the frame of reference. If, for example, the traffic police, the traffic engineers, the safety engineers, public works officials, public relations officials, and other concerned groups communicate sufficiently with each other and exchange ideas and information, each may in time come to see and appreciate the problem from the points of views of the others. As a result, the viewpoint of each may be broadened, and a concerted, coordinated effort can be made to solve the problem.

Closely related with the subject of communications is a final question to be considered. To what extent should top management exercise overhead control over middle management, and to what extent should middle management be autonomous and independent. This is a difficult question which can best be answered perhaps on a case-to-case basis. Nevertheless, I believe there are some general, guiding principles.

As to technical matters within the jurisdiction of their agencies, middle managers should have, in my opinion, a wide degree of independence. Only under extraordinary circumstances should top management interfere with middle management's technical decisions. If, for example, the pure food agency condemns food as unfit for human consumption or a division of factory inspection requires the harnessing of dangerous machines, top management should ordinarily accept those decisions unless there is a question of fraud, caprice, or ultra veres (illegal authority) by middle management. Under no circumstances is top management justified in interfering with technical decisions for purely partisan reasons. The temptations on top management for such intervention may at times be strong. For instance, a liberal contributor to the campaign funds of the political party to which a top manager belongs and owes his position, may request a reversal of a decision affecting his interests; or a powerful legislator, whom, for obvious reasons, top management does not wish to antagonize, may ask that a decision affecting one of his constituents be overruled. In all such cases, it is submitted, top management has the duty to place the public's interests above party considerations. Aside from the ethical considerations, it can be said that good men thrive on responsibility, and that a wide area of division and subdivision independence is indispensable for the development of strong, resourceful middle managers.

At the same time, however, it must be recognized that there is a proper area of high policy, the responsibility for which rests with top management. This responsibility cannot be adequately fulfilled unless middle managers are responsive. If, for example, top management has decided on certain measures for combatting inflation, it is essential that all agencies which affect the price and credit structure adjust their acts and programs to the accomplishment of the general aim. But sometimes middle managers resent the disturbances and distractions to their routine which such adjustments necessitate. There is often a tendency on the part of divisions and subdivisions to want to be left alone. (This tendency, incidentally, is sometimes supported and defended by a politically influential clientele which the agency regulates and with which the agency has become friendly--at times too friendly for the best interests of the public). Even if a clientele is not involved, middle managers, as already noted, may forget always to consider problems in the light of the needs and welfare of the whole department or the entire government. It is properly within the province of top management to require middle managers to stay in accord with over-all departmental and government-wide policies.

## SUPPLEMENT

### NOTES ON THE MANAGERIAL ASPECTS OF MIDDLE MANAGERS

#### I. Self-Evaluation

How may a supervisor evaluate his own work and the efficiency of his organization? The thirty-minute check-up on administrative management reproduced below can, with slight modification, be used by managers at most levels of most functions.

##### A Thirty-Minute Check-up on Administrative Management ...

1. Are we satisfied with the quantity of work output?
2. Are we satisfied with the quality of work output?
3. At what levels are operating difficulties apparent?
4. Are the difficulties due to factors beyond our control?
5. Are there some difficulties that we could control?
6. Do operating and staff officers use accepted methods to identify unsatisfactory situations?
7. Do all of our employees know what duties they are expected to perform?
8. Do all of our employees know how well they are expected to perform their duties?
9. Do all our employees know the relationship of their work to that of other work areas?
10. Are our employees in general working with management or only for it?
11. Are we using the following tools of management to remedy undesirable situations?

Competent staff assistance

Increased delegation of supervisory and production duties

A sane program to train each employee in the skills and knowledges he needs to do his job

A plan of cross-unit training where practicable

Requirement of understudies

Satisfactory employee relations program

An adequate placement program.

12. Where can this agency get assistance in its personnel utilization program?

Prepared by Milon L. Brown in 1945, then Chairman of the Committee on Training, Philadelphia Federal Council of Personnel Administration.

#### II. Principles Basic to Good Relations Between Manager and Subordinates

##### A. General Principles

1. Treat all people as individuals
2. Let people know how they are getting along
3. Give credit when due
4. Give people a chance to talk over in advance the things that affect them
5. Make the best use of people's ability

Walter Dietz, The Foreman's Basic Kit

- B. Handling a Specific Supervisory Problem. In dealing with a specific supervisory question the manager may follow the four basic principles emphasized in the War Manpower Commission's Job Relations Training Program in the United States during World War II:

1. Get the facts--be sure you have the whole story.
2. Weigh and decide--don't jump to conclusions.
3. Take action--don't "pass the buck."
4. Check results--did your action help production?

#### C. Communications

Chester I. Banard has said that "a person can and will accept a communication as authoritative only when four conditions simultaneously obtain":

1. He can and does understand the communication
2. At the time of his decision, he believes that it is not inconsistent with the purpose of the organization
3. At the time of his decision, he believes it to be compatible with his personal interest as a whole
4. He is able mentally and physically to comply with it

#### III. Ten Commandments of Good Organization

The American Management Association has emphasized the importance of the understanding of responsibility in its ten rules for effective organization which follow:

1. Definite and clear-cut responsibilities should be assigned to each executive
2. Responsibility should always be coupled with corresponding authority.
3. No change should be made in the scope or responsibilities of a position without a definite understanding to that effect on the part of all persons concerned.
4. No executive or employee, occupying a single position in the organization, should be subject to definite orders from more than one source.
5. Orders should never be given to subordinates over the head of a responsible executive. Rather than do this the officer in question should be supplanted
6. Criticism of subordinates should, whenever possible, be made privately, and in no case should a subordinate be criticized in the presence of executives or employees of equal or lower rank.
7. No dispute or difference between executives or employees as to authority or responsibilities should be considered too trivial for prompt and careful adjudication.
8. Promotions, wage changes, and disciplinary action should always be approved by the executive immediately superior to the one directly responsible.
9. No executive or employee should ever be required, or expected to be at the same time an assistant to, and critic of, another.
10. Any executive whose work is subject to regular inspection should, enable him to maintain an independent check of the quality of his work.

#### IV. Administrative Delegation of Authority.

James D. Mooney and Alan C. Reiley have written:

... the real leader ... finds it easy to delegate authority, and is quick to do so whenever he perceives its necessity, but he remains ever conscious of the fact that there is one thing he cannot delegate, namely his own authority and the responsibility which it includes. It is in fact this very sense of responsibility which makes him so ready to delegate any task as soon as the total task begins to exceed his own unaided powers. Such men are the true organizers; we might call them the born organizers. Organizing genius seems to know instinctively that it must operate through the principle of delegation in order to achieve a real collective efficiency in the pursuit of the common object.

