

# Review Articles

## Administration As a Science and an Art

*The Executive in Action* by Marshall E. Dimock. New York City, Harper, 1945. ix, 276p.

In recent years a respectable literature of library administration has been accumulating. In the earlier stages, it was largely represented by *ad hoc*, rule-of-thumb pronouncements. As library administration has come of age, of necessity it has increasingly been refined and systematized through drawing on systematic library studies and experiments. Likewise, it has built upon the worth-while findings of students of administration in other fields and students of administration in general.

The war years have produced an increased flow of such valuable general administration materials which the library administrator can only ignore at his peril, for it provides bases and breadth for the specialized studies in his own field.

One of the best of these recent works is Marshall E. Dimock's *The Executive in Action*, which is the first detailed published analysis of the day-to-day work of a top executive—a study of what one able executive did and why. The quality of the book results in large measure from the happy blending of the author's theoretical and practical backgrounds—his years as a professor of public administration at the University of Chicago, his detailed studies of the administration of both business firms and government agencies, and his establishment and administration of the Recruitment and Manning Organization of the War Shipping Administration. He is thus able effectively to combine general explanation with examples from personal experience, in his effort to show the universality of large-scale management's chief problems, whether in business or in government.

Like Urwick and some other leading authorities on administration, Dimock feels that the field has developed a sufficient number of valid generalizations based on experience to have its scientific aspects. But the human aspects of administration will always keep it also to a considerable extent an art. He is

aware of the delicacy of administrative relationships in which the intuitive sense of the leader, produced by good experience and good judgment, counts for much.

Dimock differs with much recent administrative thought in urging caution in the expansion of separately organized staff functions. He feels that these should be kept to the minimum of efficiency and tied in closely with the flow of executive work, but (in general) not in the chief executive's office. Thus, the chief has maximum time for supervision of line departments. Thus, the good staff officer will feel himself a part of the stream of operations but will retain his perspective.

Public relations, planning, and personnel, as staff functions, come in for incisive comment. The first is given a wide and adequate interpretation. The author emphasizes planning as a comprehensive, continuous, and democratic process, underlining the point that major contributions to both goals and strategy often originate far down the line of command. The interrelatedness of an organization's parts and problems is presented as a demand for comprehensive and continuous planning. An interesting section discusses the role of advisory groups in the administrative process, together with suggested tactics for administrators.

Personnel comes in for detailed treatment. More leeway is urged for the chief to make free choice of his chief assistants in order to assure compatibility, a condition rated high by the author. Modification of civil service procedure is also urged for the rank and file of employees, making the personnel officer a truly advisory official and not an executive official. The author emphasizes that results are obtained largely by happy combinations of personnel rather than by systems alone.

Dimock regards the chief functions of the top executive as three in number: keeping the enterprise on an even keel ("he must constantly expect the unexpected"); delegating as much as possible; and using the rest of his time for planning. The first includes the

executive as trouble shooter and as supervisor, which he recognizes as demanding a fine balance between too strict and too loose a check, either extreme resulting in reduced efficiency. But he would check at least once daily with subordinates who report directly to him. Good supervision will not prove odious to either party, for the good executive can be said to have influence *with* people rather than power *over* them. This influence will be engendered by the executive's having superior ability which will be recognized as such, by giving proper recognition to the contributions of others, and otherwise being fair to associates and subordinates. One of the executive's big tasks may be that of bringing together and harmonizing conflicting viewpoints of his chief assistants, since potential friction increases with the depth of specialization of people with different backgrounds. Effective techniques of staff conference are suggested.

#### *Central-Peripheral Relationship*

The author feels that the central-peripheral relationship should be one of centralized policy decision and check with decentralized execution. Since management is the power to determine what happens to and through personalities, he opposes Burnham's philosophy of a managerial elite. He agrees with Urwick that in a complex social order, people at all employment levels can exercise some measure of leadership. And he feels that encouragement of people on all levels to exercise some aspects of leadership promotes the interests of both the organization and its individuals. The extent and types of power delegated will, of course, vary with the personal qualities of the chief and his subordinates and with the subject involved. Lack of proper delegation, however, may indicate conceit, perfectionism, or lack of self-confidence on the part of the chief, any one of which may be fatal to his administration. In feeling that the chief "must be steeped in the detail of his organization and yet not lose sight of the grand strategy . . .," the author may himself err somewhat. He seems to feel that the chief cannot delegate a great deal of top supervision, public relations, and planning work.

While Dimock has written a volume of the inspirational type which is a happy combination of the theoretical and the practical, it is ably supplemented by Chester I. Barnard's

*The Functions of the Executive* (Harvard, 1944) and Lyndall Urwick's *The Elements of Administration* (Harper, 1944). The first gives a stimulating philosophical approach to administration, with emphasis on those intangibles of effective, democratic day-to-day personal relationships (the informal organization), which Dimock has acutely shown as capable of inspiring supreme achievement or institutionalizing sabotage under a placid surface of formal correctness and genuineness.

Urwick believes that there is a logical and scientific foundation for the art of administration. On the basis of his acute analysis of the conclusions of leading authorities, he is confident in stating a group of verifiable principles. Most authorities agree with this thesis; but an occasional penetrating challenge comes from the pages of the specialized journals, such as *Public Management*, *The Personnel Journal*, *The Public Personnel Review*, and *The Public Administration Review*. A good example is Herbert Simon's "The Proverbs of Administration" (*Public Administration Review* 6:53-67, Winter 1946), which raises modifying questions regarding such widely accepted principles as those which hold that administrative efficiency is almost always increased in large organizations by specialization of tasks, arranging employees in a hierarchy of authority, limiting the executive's span of control to only a few deputies, and placing workers in groups for purposes of control according to a single criterion: e.g., purpose, process, clientele, or place.

We might conclude with a word about bureaucracy, a much-maligned term but a reality throughout the worlds of private and governmental business. Joseph M. Juran devotes a small but penetrating book to this phenomenon (*Bureaucracy: A Challenge to Better Management*, Harper, 1944), emphasizing its strengths, weaknesses, and potentialities. Dimock's chapter on "The Structural Groove" likewise emphasizes how the executive's ability and tactics may determine whether he can use the bureaucracy effectively or it uses him for *its* purposes.

There is no royal road to success in a profession which is an art and is striving to become in part a science. But the current literature of the field holds forth promise of being an increasingly effective guide along the way.—*William P. Tucker.*