

## A common-sense approach to administration

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***The Effective Administrator* by Donald E. Walker. Josey-Bass. San Francisco, 1979. 208 pp.**

In *The Effective Administrator*, Donald E. Walker, president of Southeastern Massachusetts University, argues for a "democratic, pluralistic" model for the university, and throughout the book he explores the implications of this model, a frankly political one, for administrative policies, procedures, and, especially, style. He contends that administrators who fully understand this model and carry out its imperatives will enjoy the moral authority that is indispensable to academic leadership.

Early in the book, Walker states what I take to be his animating concept: "At the heart of the university is the centrality of the individual. The belief that operates as a conscious and unconscious dynamic is that the individual celebrating his or her own intelligence through industry informed by moral vision will make the best contribution to the university and to the world. People are regarded as more important than procedures" (p. 23). Ultimately, he expresses succinctly what is implied on nearly every page: "There is tremendous wit and wisdom in a university. The job of administration is to call it forth and put it to work" (p. 138). Walker's first audience is college presidents and deans. But writing program administrators too might learn something of value from the general principles of good administration Walker espouses.

**Impersonality and pragmatism.** During the last 20 years, Walker has held a variety of administrative posts, including the presidency of Idaho State University, so he is able to illustrate his ideas with many examples and anecdotes. He also enlivens the text with pithy remarks (usually attributed to "someone who once said") intended to carry the force of folk wisdom. The result is a style that gives the impression of a real person speaking about matters that have more than theoretical significance for him. Indeed, he disavows an intention to write either a theoretical treatise or a handbook on administration, but rather hopes his book will "bridge the gap" between the two poles: he sets out to produce a practical book "informed by a point of view." Individual readers are best left to judge whether Mr. Walker has attained his objective. His many examples of how real problems were resolved demonstrate the efficacy of his point of view and, correspondingly, the failure of authoritarian methods. To this extent, the book is also something of a polemic, but a polemic sufficiently muted by the rhetoric of common sense to retain the attention, if not to secure the assent, of people with a competing philosophical bias.

Walker views the university as an organism with powers of self-stabilization

that tend to produce a state of health. For people who view phenomena characteristic of a university as evidence of pathology, Walker's metaphor will seem at best misguided, at worst mischievous. He would reply that many of these phenomena—for instance, reflexive contentiousness, the (alleged) impracticality of the faculty, obsession with apparent trivia—are comprehensible if one adopts his notion of the university as a political institution reflecting not only specific realities of its own but also the more general realities of all of its political subdivisions. The struggles for power and scarce resources that inevitably go on in nation states, and in federal units within nation states, are duplicated in the academy, where a concentration of highly intelligent, creative, articulate people lends special intensity to a process of conflict that is at once natural and healthy. Within this frame, Walker assigns to administrators the role of problem solver and facilitator, as distinct from the role of lawgiver, authoritarian leader, or moral conscience. He would appear also to recommend a scrupulous impersonality and a dogged pragmatism as the chief strategies of correct administrative conduct: in short, statesmanship.

Walker's obvious passion for the university, then, finds expression in a dispassionate style of leadership. Repeatedly, he warns administrators against emotional involvement in campus disputes and, emphatically, against using punitive measures even when transgressions appear to have been committed. *He* puts his faith in procedures that carry collective authority because they *have* been established *by the community*. Nowhere is his emphasis on the *polls* stronger than when he is speaking of the need for rational mechanisms that take into account the interests of all the constituencies within the university.

**The art of sharing authority.** The psychological principles of administration that Walker propounds are applicable to the management of writing programs. The WPA functions, however, in circumstances that are somewhat different from those of a dean or president. Both the scope and power of the WPA's authority are limited in comparison to that of line administrators. One of Walker's key points, however, is that the good administrator will not rely on legal authority but rather will work from a base of authority that has been earned, that derives ultimately from the consent of the governed, and that must constantly be renewed in the dynamic of the democratic process. It is always a shared authority.

In rejecting the pyramid model of administration, Walker in fact comes close to recommending for the university at large the management model that most successful WPAs use, whether or not they are consciously guided by a theory of administration. Nowadays, one rarely encounters, even in very large programs, the autocratic WPA who is determined to force compliance with a lock-step syllabus. Even in large, highly centralized programs, which of necessity seek some degree of uniformity in a course plan, instructional discretion is likely to be permitted. *Laissez faire* may not have arrived, but *Czarism* has certainly been discarded.

Walker ends his book with a list of "axioms" to summarize his message. Unavoidably, such pronouncements sound banal, but they also typify his common-sense approach to administration. It might be useful to select a few of them and see how they apply to the job of the WPA.

*The job of administration is to call forth talent—to help people work in effective and constructive ways. Health and vitality come from the bottom up and one*

*should take care not to stifle sources of creativity. Those closest to the problem often have the best solution. Consult them first.*

I recall that when I worked as a TA for Francis Christensen 25 years ago, he followed the practice, unusual in those days, of holding with the writing staff what would now be called brain-storming sessions. He also encouraged junior instructors and TAs to share ideas with him individually. We knew that he was the expert, of course; most of us took his graduate courses in composition and rhetoric. But we also knew that he trusted us to learn valuable lessons from our own experience. Those lessons, he felt, *were useful* for everybody. I adopted Christensen's method of leadership in my own writing program and was constantly pleased by the results. As often as not, one teacher's problems proved to be problems that we all faced in one form or other. Equally as often, the collective ingenuity of the staff produced solutions that benefited the entire program. Ideas that looked good when hatched in isolation from classroom conditions (that is to say, in meetings of the composition committee) often failed to survive the test of reality, and were either rejected *or* modified.

*An administrator works with the consent of the governed. The most reliable tools of the administrator are diplomacy and persuasion.*

Even WPAs who work from a syllabus or detailed course plan are aware of the need to explain the program to the staff. The more persuasive the explanation, the greater the chances that instructors will try to make the plan work. Moreover, the WPA is often called upon to exercise diplomacy in resolving disputes between students and instructors, who constitute two levels of "the governed." Now that we have abandoned the absolutist notion that the instructor is automatically and always right, the WPA requires a high order of judgment and tact to adjudicate disputes over grades, fair treatment, and other issues that arise in the contemporary university. Wise WPAs rely upon well-defined procedures that are understood by all to exist for the sole purpose of ensuring academic justice for staff and students alike.

Of course, sound procedures do not always moderate the feelings that erupt when personalities collide or when the procedures themselves are seen by one or both parties to a dispute as favoring the other party. No handbook or axiom can guide a WPA faced with a person who insists he or she has been treated unfairly. In these cases, after diplomacy and persuasion have been tried, the WPA, like any other administrator, must render and hold to a decision and then live with the consequences. Walker is right in emphasizing administrative style, which equates roughly with rhetorical *ethos*, because procedures, after all, are merely mechanisms. They carry authority only when it is not possible "to tell the dancer from the dance."

We should be quick to specify, too, the kind of authority that finally distinguishes the WPA from central administrators: the authority that comes with the ability to demonstrate knowledge of one's subject. Administration, strictly speaking, has no subject matter. (All right, its processes are its subject matter.) WPAs must do more than show that they know how to lead. They must show others what they should know about composition, how to know it, and how to share that knowledge with others—the students.

*Don't underestimate the strength of a team. It is true—all of us together are smarter than any one of us alone.*

This is a corollary of the idea that administrators should "call forth talent." A writing staff is, of course, different from a college president's council or some other form of administrative network. Skill, knowledge, status, experience, and dedication are not distributed evenly among the members of a writing staff. Neither is the willingness to be led. While this may also be true of an "administrative team," no collection of line and staff deans, for instance, is likely to contain any TAs, nor, for that matter, any full professors of English who consider themselves expert in the teaching of composition, no matter how loudly they announce their distaste for the undertaking. Today, regular faculty, including senior people, are assuming a greater share of the teaching load in composition programs. For many of these professors, this development means a return to the kind of assignment they endured as beginning instructors and may be connected in their minds with the ominous decline in literature course enrollments. The WPA's "team" may thus be composed of TAs, part-time instructors, and people on all rungs of the professorial ladder. Together in one room at a staff meeting may be the naive and the jaded, and side by side may sit a full professor and a TA who have just come from a graduate seminar in which no hint of team play has ever been introduced. The TA may in fact be a better writing teacher than the full professor, but the WPA is well advised not to celebrate this fact if he wants cooperation from the regular staff.

In a situation where the staff is composed largely of TAs and directed by a senior person with a distinguished reputation in the field, the circumstances are not unlike those on an athletic team. The team members are learners as well as teachers, and they know it. The director acts as a sort of coach, perhaps in several capacities: as an assigner of position, as leader of workshops, as evaluator of performance, and often as instructor in graduate courses concerned with the teaching of composition and with rhetorical theory. His or her authority is established, and he or she is expected to use it. How the director uses it depends upon the design of the program, departmental policy, and, ultimately, personal style. In any case, the team analogy cannot be carried too far, for reasons too obvious to state. But the WPA who establishes a good system of internal communication for the program will discover that a constant flow of ideas and criticism results in practical suggestions that raise the level of instruction in writing courses.

It is hard to fault Walker's sensible approach to administration, *except* perhaps to regret that he did not emphasize the primacy of the instructional program. His democratic model would appear to assign equal importance to all the activities on a campus, since he makes no overt distinctions among constituencies. His brand of political realism may, of course, be seen to promote the health of the instructional program insofar as the morale of a steady and dynamic community would certainly be reflected in teaching, learning, *and* scholarship. It is perhaps to cavil, therefore, to hope for an explicit definition of the university that accords more closely with one's own. It is likely, too, that Walker assumes that he and his audience share an understanding too obvious to require statement: namely, that a university exists primarily to disseminate knowledge and to foster the growth of the mind.

In the end, one hesitates to say that this book belongs on a reading list for WPAs, though it certainly would be useful to one who aspired to a position in

central administration. Indeed, the WPA seeking information on program management is not likely to find much help anywhere in the literature of administration, in part because that literature is increasingly dominated by a systems approach only marginally relevant to writing programs. This is not to say that WPAs cannot profit from knowledge about current management theory and practice. It is rather to point out a need for specialized work in the field of writing program administration, work that addresses particular issues and problems connected with the job, which now, perhaps for the first time, is being accorded a distinct professional status. As more people share information with their colleagues, in journals like this one, we can hope for the development of a body of knowledge that, in time, will ease the pressure, traditionally felt by WPAs, to learn everything from scratch about the job while trying to do it, and, at the same time, manage their other duties in the classroom and library. The new importance of writing programs corresponds naturally with an upgrading of the position of WPA, and, just as naturally, we can look for the good people who are performing the function well to tell us what they are learning about how to do it.