

Dealing with Bureaucracy

Picture this: *Your organization is planning an important event. Everything is proceeding on schedule. Then you discover there is a procedure that hasn't been followed that will prevent your event from taking place, and you have no idea how to correct the situation. Sound familiar? Congratulations! You've just run into "the bureaucracy".*

While many of these unwelcome surprises can be avoided with sufficient planning, dealing with bureaucracy is inevitable in our complex society. Whether it's a matter of managing finances, using facilities, ordering materials, or making use of other resources on campus or in the community, you and your organization will have to deal with a number of offices and staff people to accomplish your goals.

WHAT IS BUREAUCRACY?

Those things that we usually call bureaucracy are often rules, regulations, policies, and procedures that were designed to allow organizations to efficiently handle the large numbers of people who use their services. While these administrative procedures probably started as good ideas, they may have turned into a lot of "red tape" that leaves many people feeling helpless.

HOW TO WORK EFFECTIVELY WITHIN A BUREAUCRACY

- View the bureaucracy as a system to cooperate WITH, rather than as an adversary to fight AGAINST. A positive attitude is more likely to generate a solution to your problem.
- Learn how the Bureaucracy operates. Take time to break it down into its component parts. This will make the system more manageable.
- Remember that a bureaucracy is made up of individuals. You can enlist these people to work with you in your goals.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT THESE GENERAL SUGGESTIONS:

1) *KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO ACCOMPLISH*

As much as possible, be clear about the resources you need, the facilities you want to use, the procedure that needs to be explained, or the event that you want to sponsor. Then, as you begin to deal with bureaucratic procedures, you will be able to say, "This is what I want to accomplish. What do I need to do?"

2) *KEEP NOTES*

Start a file or a notebook and put all materials pertaining to your project in one place for easy reference. Develop a list of people of contact including names, titles, office locations, and phone numbers. Note down each time you talked with someone on the list.

3) *KNOW WHO TO TALK TO*

Try to find the person or office that can be of the most help to you. Make use of phone directories, campus guides, office brochures, and other students in your research. If you can't come up with an answer, make your best guess. Go to an office that seems appropriate and say, "This is what I want to do. Who do I need to talk to?" When you find the right person, expect that you might have to make an appointment.

4) *DO IT IN PERSON*

Simple questions can often be answered over the phone. But if your request might be complicated, try to deliver it in person. A face-to-face encounter reduces the chances for miscommunication.

5) *BE COURTEOUS*

It's likely that the person who can help you has already talked with dozens of people before you, and many of them have been rude or impatient. Your courtesy will make a good impression and will increase the chances that he or she will take some extra time to help you. And, you may never know when you may need this person's help again.

6) *TRY TO STAND OUT FROM THE CROWD*

A bureaucracy tends to treat everyone the same. Gently do whatever you can so that you will not be treated like all the others. Smile, say "Hello", identify yourself and your organization clearly, complete forms neatly, ask your questions directly, and say "Thank You". Be able to clearly indicate what you have already accomplished.

7) *ASK QUESTIONS*

If anything is unclear, be sure to have it explained until you do understand it. It's usually okay to question why a certain rule or policies exists, but try not to sound argumentative or to put anyone on the defensive.

8) *PUT IT IN WRITING*

If you are sponsoring a program or event, have a proposal neatly typed out and leave a copy with the appropriate person. If you reach an agreement, write out a summary after the meeting. Send a copy to the person you talked with, asking that he or she corrects any errors.

9) *PLEAD YOUR CASE*

If you want to ask for an exception, first be sure you understand the rule or procedure and why it exists. Make your request courteously. If possible, show how your group can still fulfill the intent of the rule. Be prepared to be rejected, but there's no harm in trying.

10) *BE PATIENT*

Sometimes the person or office you have contacted simply doesn't have the answer. Ask for the name of another person or office that might be able to help.

Sometimes there is little you can do to cut through the red tape. But the suggestions in this handout may help make the process easier to tolerate and help you to make the best of a difficult situation. By learning the system, you'll be better prepared the next time you have to deal with bureaucracy.