

# Probation

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# Organisations: Even More Interesting Than Shovels

Andrew Bridges reviews 'The Structuring of Organisations'

You may believe like the Michael Palin character in *Ripping Yarns*, that there is no more exciting conversation topic on earth than 'Shovels' and 'The Mean Average Rainfall in Lancashire'. You might on the other hand, think that 'Organisations' runs them both pretty close. Certainly a mention of the word is as good as any of finding out what a glazed expression looks like. Nevertheless, I want to show that this topic could be both relevant and even encouraging to all members of the Probation Service.

Essentially this is a review of a book by Henry Mintzberg<sup>1</sup> which confounded my most extreme prejudices about the usual standard of American academic writing in the social sciences. Not only does it successfully review, analyse and synthesise the current knowledge of organisational theory, but it also points the Probation Service towards a structure which is low in formal hierarchy and offers a constructive way of managing Probation's 'skilled sophisticated staff.'<sup>2</sup>

Mintzberg leads the reader along a carefully designed path through the jungle of (to me) hitherto baffling material. He illustrates each point using a wide range of examples of many different organisations: factory, army, prison, hospital, college. He demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of the different types of organisation at achieving their different purposes.

## The Erosion of Professional Bureaucracy

Naturally the Probation Service is not one of his specific illustrations, but it is not difficult to spot our 'traditional' structure as closely resembling the model of 'Professional Bureaucracy.' The autonomous front-line workers can get on with their work developing their individual skills, relatively free from outside interference. However, the system is poor at building co-ordination between individual workers, cannot easily deal with incompetent or unconscientious staff, and is ill-suited to bringing about innovations.

However, the most common way of tackling

these problems is for the administrators and/or paymasters to seek to impose more and more external controls on the front-line workers. The organisation comes to look increasingly like the 'Machine Bureaucracy' model, with the consequent self-defeating stifling effect on worker-motivation, initiative and overall quality of work. If the pressure for external control is from the government (e.g. FMI?), then:

... the government looks top-down to the senior managers to implement its standards, while the professionals look bottom-up to them to resist the standards. The strategic apex (*County Probation HQ*) gets caught between a government technostucture (*the Treasury*) hungry for control and an operating core (*probation officers*) hanging on to its autonomy for dear life. No one gains in the process.<sup>3</sup>

## Adhocracy

Most organisational structures are better suited to the purpose of maintaining routines than the solving of problems because they formalise and regularise the staff's working behaviour.

But the innovative problem-solving structure which Mintzberg describes as the 'Adhocracy' instead features informal co-ordination and control of highly-trained specialists from different fields working closely together, typically in decentralised project teams. This structure is therefore favoured by organisations whose very job it is to innovate e.g. NASA, the Boeing Company, and the National Film Board of Canada.

Co-ordination within the project teams is the responsibility of everyone, not just the team manager. While there are plenty of managers in this structure they need to be part of the teams (or at least amongst them) not above them, and their main tasks are to liaise, negotiate and share information with the other project teams. The main tasks of the top managers are to handle internal conflict (constructively, and there is plenty of it), to monitor and evaluate the projects, and to represent the organisation in its 'external' relations. Strategy decisions do not always come from the top or indeed the bottom, but can be initiated from any part of the organisation. Finally, in this most 'advanced' of the organisational structures,

internal communication is typically informal and non-authoritarian, relying on worker 'professionalism' rather than rules of behaviour.

### Relevance and Costs

This structure is becoming very fashionable outside the British public services, but that is not the reason why we should be considering it. We have to meet continually changing needs, and our 'skilled staff' work most creatively when their initiative and worth is recognised. However, there are some important warning notes:

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1. There is a large core of our work which remains mainly routine, and adhocacies are very inefficient in maintaining routines.
2. The lack of formalised structure and rules of behaviour leaves few safeguards against hare-brained or destructive ideas.
3. The structure depends on staff being prepared

to shift jobs and work in different capacities and locations at short notice.

4. Adhocracy is 'a nice place to visit, but no place to spend a career'<sup>4</sup> — so people feel after several years in jobs with such very ambiguous roles.

However, these problems can be tackled constructively rather than avoided, if the benefits of moving towards such a structure are thought to be worth the costs.

This survey, necessarily superficial, nevertheless should indicate that the idea of 'Adhocracy' offers great potential benefits to the working of the Probation Service, although also at some high costs. Surely this idea is worth fuller consideration, particularly if alternatives are to be sought to the traditional obsessions in British Public Service; formal hierarchy and authority, line and staff distinction, job delineation and the autonomy of the recognised professional.

### REFERENCES

1. H. Mintzberg, *The Structuring of Organisations*, (Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1979).
2. Michael Willson, 'Management, Retention and Control of Skilled Sophisticated Staff in the late '80s' *Probation Journal* Vol. 31 No. 1 March 1984.
3. Mintzberg, h. 378
4. Mintzberg, h. 461.



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**'Like the sad couple in the weatherhouse, reparation and punishment can never meet but merely pivot in and out of their respective doors as the barometer rises and falls.'**

*Dave Burnham*