DISCRETIONARY DECISION MAKING IN THE MANAGEMENT OF HUMAN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

Therese J. Dent, Ph.D.

Diplomate Clinical Social Worker, Lakeside Center;
Adjunct Assistant Professor, St. Louis University,
St. Louis Missouri

Introduction

Human service program directors are faced with guidelines for program delivery usually created at a level removed from local conditions. As one consequence, program directors are often confronted with a difficult choice--Do you follow the guidelines or do you deviate in order to deliver a good program? The research reported here demonstrates that at least some of the "common sense" adaptive behaviors of those in the field charged with program delivery are the product of individual leader qualities and organizational dynamics.

Discretionary decision making is most likely to occur when the decision maker has acquired information and knowledge which goes beyond or adds to that which structured the program guidelines. Use of discretion involves the acquisition and utilization of information unique to the local context that impels variation from a mandated guideline. Several theorists have described behavioral decision models founded on the notion of limited knowledge and bounded rationality (Simon, 1955; Etzionni, 1967, 1986; Braybrooke and Lindblom, 1963). These are pragmatic modifications of the classic rational planning model which idealistically and impossibly calls for complete information and rationality. The ability to perceive and interpret reality from a local implementing context adds to the font of information available to program decision makers. This added information facilitates and encourages the use of discretion regarding compliance with mandated guidelines at a local level.

Rigid adherence to rules, which may be more typical of technological organizations, is frequently experienced as counter productive in human service organizations. It is a common experience in social work practice that the physical welfare and/or emotional well-being of certain clients may not be best served by fitting them into the procrustean bed of program rules and regulations. The state of the art and the science in human services is not sufficiently sophisticated to program delivery in a manner which takes

into account the emerging uniqueness of individuals. Genetic and environmental dynamics of individual clients influence the effectiveness and efficacy of a program for an individual.

In similar fashion, genetic and environmental dynamics influence decision making on an organizational level. The idiosyncrasies of local cultural and political constraints and demands foster discretionary decision making. An examination, therefore, of both human and organizational factors which influence discretion is needed. Social workers by training may be more aware of the human factors involved in discretion. This research focuses on the organizational dynamics which also result in the use of discretion.

Focus of the Research

Increased sensitivity to the complexities of program delivery has been the result of recent implementation and organizational studies (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Scheirer, 1981; Meltsner & Bellavita, 1983; Palumbo, 1980). The need for accountability and legal compliance requires standardization of program design and procedures (Sabatier and Mazmanian, 1980; Williams, 1976). Standardization of program delivery is counterbalanced, however, by a recognition that significant discretionary decision making not only occurs but is necessary at the point where staff interact with clients (Lipsky, 1978). The notion of street level bureaucracy suggests that discretionary decision making can become an organization imperative in order to adjust program goals to local conditions and clients.

The literature on implementation and organizational change reveals further that local organizational leaders play a prominent role in adapting program to context and client needs (Nakamura & Smallwood, 1980). Katz and Kahn (1978; 532) indicate specifically that leadership emerges "as individuals take charge of relating a unit or subsystem to the external structure or environment." This follows from Rice's (1963; 21) description of it as a break between parts of the system.

> In general, if leadership is a boundary
> function, the relationship between a leader
> and his followers will depend to a major
> extent on the leader's capacity to manage
> the relationship between the external and
> internal environments in a way that will
> allow his followers to perform their primary
> task.

Creating a program environment in which staff can successfully perform their primary tasks in a manner conducive to achieving program goals is, therefore, the task of a flexible leader. Policy and program guidelines must be interpreted to adapt programs to local conditions. What is needed is a framework that would permit some ordering of how this interpretation by local leaders occurs.

Tichy (1980) provides such a framework useful for understanding organizational dynamics to which a leader must adjust. He describes all organizations as experiencing ongoing interactive problem cycles of a political, cultural, and technical nature. These synergistic and simultaneous cycles provide a context for understanding organizations as they attempt to perform their primary tasks and to ensure organizational survival. The problem cycles are interactive and trigger one another such that none is ever totally resolved. A peak in one cycle precipitates a peak in another. Uncertainty prevails, and important events may not be interpreted in a manner to reduce that uncertainty. Each cycle is characterized by a particular set of uncertainty creating events and change triggers new uncertainties.

The person attempting to balance these uncertainties with the constraints of program guidelines and the needs of program clients is seen to be in a pivotal leadership position. He faces the challenges of forging congruent linkages of policy goals and program guidelines with the idiosyncrasies of a local context and the behavior of persons within it. In such a situation, discretion and adaptation strategies become an obvious integral aspect of decision making.

The research problem is to clarify some of the forces that result in variation from program guidelines despite a mandated program design.

The study explores three research questions. Given an initial organizational context into which a program was introduced:

1. What organizational problem cycle(s) appeared dominant, and what is the relationship of problem cycle to adherence to guidelines for program delivery?
2. Do differences in leader behavior qualities of a program director make a difference in terms of the program's adherence to guidelines for program delivery?

3. What is the effect of the inter-
action among problem cycle, quality
of leader behavior, and leader
activity on program delivery?

Methodology

The implementation processes of eleven youth
employment demonstration programs sponsored by the United
States Department of Labor were the research sites. These
programs were part of a national research project, the
Vocational Exploration Demonstration Project (VEDP). As
such, they were required to follow a rigorous experimental
design. They shared a mandated, highly structured, and
closely monitored set of program guidelines, procedures and
process. Despite this, variation in the delivery of these
programs occurred. For purposes of this research, program
delivery is defined as the degree to which adherence to
program guidelines was obtained by a local VEDP program.

The local context for the implementation of the eleven
programs varied widely. Program directors in these sites
were said to have faced problems imposed by at least two
sets of constraints and demands: (1) those imposed by the
formal policy mandate of the program which included an
intended policy goal of increasing the employability of
youth and specific guidelines for program delivery; and,
(2) those imposed by the complexities of the organizational
and environmental context into which the policy was
introduced.

The organizational contexts of the eleven programs
varied according to the size and type of sponsoring
organization. Some were sponsored by CETA organizations
which were larger, well established federally funded
organizations. Others were sponsored by well established
private non-profit organizations which were larger than
VEDP in size of budget and number of personnel. The third
category consisted of more recently or newly established
private non-profit organizations which were smaller in size
of budget and number of personnel; some of these even
depended on the program it sponsored for survival.

The planning, assisting and assessing activities for
VEDP involved a partnership among three organizations. The
Office of Community Youth Programs (OCYP) of the United
States Department of Labor, Employment and Training
Administration served as the general manager of the
project. Saint Louis University Center for Urban Programs
(SLU/CUP) contracted to develop and administer the research
design and was responsible for the collection and analysis
of data. The National Alliance of Business (NAB)

established administrative systems and provided technical assistance.

Multiple sources of both primary and secondary data describing program implementation were collected by SLU/CUP. From multiple data sources available to the author, case studies of the eleven sites were constructed. These case studies described the context and process of program delivery. The actions of local program directors were also a focus of the case studies.

The experience of program delivery was considered to be particularly appropriate for this exploration of differences in program delivery for two reasons. As a research demonstration project, a major on-going effort had been made to standardize program guidelines and monitor compliance. Given the nature of the original federally sponsored research project, essentially an experimental design with control group, a necessary aspect of that research involved an assessment of whether and how the "experiment" was delivered as designed. Particular effort was made to strengthen the program operations across sites to facilitate the standardization of program guidelines and delivery.

Local on-site program monitors were under contract to SLU/CUP for the purpose of routinely describing and assessing program operations. These monitor reports provided one of the major data sources for the case studies. Monitors also completed five separate structured process assessments of program implementation. These assessments contained numerous standardized indicators which called for judgmental grading; these yielded quantitative measures of adherence to program guidelines.

The use of the monitor assessments as the major source for this study has two major advantages. First, the opportunity to utilize multiple sources of data in a study increases the validity of that study through the process of triangulation of data; in this study, monitor reports and program assessments, news reports, VEDP program documents, limited participant observation and unstructured discussions with VEDP personnel and clients were triangulated. Yin (1982) recommends the above described use of multiple data sources to establish validity. Second, because VEDP was a multi-site national demonstration project, multi-site case studies could be developed to explore variance in program delivery and program context. Herriot and Firestone (1983) recommended the use of multi-site qualitative studies as a way to optimize description and generalizability in research.

The case studies served to provide background data on context, to identify problem cycles, and to describe leader action in the delivery of VEDP. Judgments were made, based on the multiple sources of data available, regarding the existence and emergence of problem cycles in a program context. Notations were also made in the case studies about the attempts of program directors to adjust to program problem cycles.

Tichy's framework of organizational problem cycles was used as the method for organizing and analyzing data in the case studies. He conceptualized organizations as having three interrelated adjustment cycles. A technical design or production problem cycle is triggered by uncertainty over information and cooperative task completion. In VEDP, technical problem cycles were generally low since training and technical assistance were readily available and resources were more than adequate. Problems in this cycle only appeared if program staff were not able to work cooperatively or did not obtain necessary information from the program director.

Cultural problem cycles are triggered by differences among personnel over values and ideology. In VEDP, this cycle arose most commonly with staff changes. Conflict and change in attitude among staff over "doing a good job for the kids" versus "going by the book" were also common, especially given the reality of the short term nature of the project. In addition, where a lack of information or direction from the program director did occur, work groups which valued finding solutions based on local conditions frequently formed.

Political problem cycles are the result of uncertainty over who has the power to allocate rewards and status and to decide on goals of the organization. Uncertainty appeared in several sites regarding the autonomy of the VEDP program within its local sponsoring organization. Sponsoring organizations were prone to attempt to influence the hiring and firing of program staff and the allocation of resources. Relations with the sponsoring organization were often unpredictable, which served to create administrative crises for the program.

The case studies focused on describing the interrelationship among problem cycles and the impact on the organization. Tichy emphasizes that none of the problems are ever resolved since organizations are dynamic and always undergoing shifts and changes. He suggests that successful change must rely on the ability to predict cycles and to channel and guide them.

A program director as a predictor and manager of change would need to demonstrate adaptable leader behavior in order to channel and guide organizational cycles. Tichy (1980, 174) describes a manager of change:

> At times (he or she must) be a political builder of coalitions, a power broker, and an influence manipulator coping with the political cycles. At other times, he or she will be solving problems rationally, relying on "scientific" data and principles to cope with the technical cycle. And at other times he or she will be an ideological leader. At still other times he or she may be doing all three simultaneously.

To measure leader behavior characteristics, a conceptually expansive instrument was thought desirable. The Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) was selected.

Historically, the LBDQ grew out of the Ohio State University Leadership Studies which produced two strongly defined dimensions of leader behavior, consideration and initiation of structure. The results of leader research and experimentation by Stodgill (1959) and Halpin and Croft (1962) supported the idea that two dimensions were not sufficient to describe all the complexities of leader behavior. Ten additional qualities of leader behavior were subsequently developed. Form XII of the LBDQ used in this study provides leader behavior measures in each of the following subscales: representation, demand reconciliation, tolerance of uncertainty, persuasiveness, initiation of structure, tolerance of freedom, role assumption, consideration, production emphasis, predictive accuracy, integration and superior orientation.

The LBDQ is suggested for use by peers, superiors or subordinates. It is recommended that the questionnaire be completed by a minimum of four persons familiar with the behavior of a given leader. The instrument was completed by national and local staff who were familiar with the behavior of local program directors. The LBDQ was given to as many local program staff as could be located (three to five per program). It was also given to the following non-program staff: the National VEDP Co-Project Director most familiar with the program in each site, the National VEDP Field Coordinator most familiar with the program in each site, and the local Program Monitor.

Appropriate procedures were followed to validate this instrument with this population.

Results

In a national multi-million dollar research demonstration project where programs were mandated with little discretion and closely monitored to follow rules, why did such considerable variance occur? What can be learned about some of the factors that influenced non-compliance with program guidelines?

First, it was found that the size of the organization sponsoring a program was related to the type of organizational problem cycle that peaked in that program. Programs which were introduced into sponsoring organizations that were small were found to be in political problem cycle peaks. Uncertainty over who had the power to manage the VEDP program was seen. This was especially critical in situations where the sponsoring organization was dependent on the VEDP program for its survival. In contrast, programs that were introduced into larger non-profit sponsoring organizations tended to experience cultural problem peaks. Uncertainty over organizational values and program priorities were common. This was most prevalent when CETA was the sponsoring organization. Conflicts in values and over the way things ought to be done frequently occurred. A VEDP program functioned with most autonomy and ease in a larger private non-profit sponsoring organization. Here VEDP was one of a number of human service programs. Attitudes toward human service were compatible and competition for resources and power was minimal.

Second, the number of problem cycles peaking at one time is related to degree of adherence to program guidelines. Table 1 indicates that those programs which were experiencing multiple problem cycle peaks tended to adhere to guidelines for program delivery more than those programs experiencing single peak problem cycles.

Table 1

Mean Score of Adherence to Program Delivery
Guidelines by Programs in Single
and Multiple Problem Cycle Peaks

Problem Cycle Peak	Adherence to Program Guidelines	
Single Peak	Program Composite Score	Mean Score for Single Peak Cycle
Pittsburgh	14.01	
San Francisco	12.80	
Memphis	17.78	
Tacoma	12.86	
New Orleans	16.06	
		14.7
Multiple Peaks		Mean Score for Multiple Peak Cycles
Haverhill	14.51	
Lansing	20.81	
Duluth	19.22	
New York City	19.00	
Allentown	15.02	
Atlanta	17.41	
		17.7

The data indicate clearly that programs which adhered
more clearly to guidelines also experienced peaks in
multiple problem cycles. Three of the four programs in
multiple peak problem cycles with the highest adherence to
guidelines scores were experiencing overwhelming management
problems. One program faced a political takeover and had
been totally shut down for a week by the mayor of the city.
Another had severe staff management problems as a result of
the sponsoring organization controlling personnel matters
and hiring unqualified staff. A third had inadequate and
inconvenient classroom space with the result that both
staff and clients were disgruntled. It appears that where
program quality was observed to be most in question,
reported adherence to guidelines was high. The less a
program appeared able to influence problem cycles and

adjust program dilemmas, the more security there appeared to be in following the rules.

Third, adherence to program guidelines correlated with a cluster of leadership dimensions in a negative fashion; here the data more resembled follower than leader behavior. Adherence to guidelines was negatively related to the LBDQ leader dimensions of consideration, persuasion, production emphasis and representation. Adherence to program guidelines was positively related only to superior orientation.

Fourth, programs which were able to remain in single peak problem cycles had program directors with higher leader behavior scores across all dimensions measured by the LBDQ. (See Table 2.)

Table 2

LBDQ Dimensions of Leader Behavior Mean Scores
by Program Directors in Single and in
Multiple Peak Problem Cycles

LBDQ Dimensions of Leader Behavior	VEDP II Program Problem Cycles	
	Single Peak Cycles N = 5	Multiple Peak Cycles N = 5
Representation	12.6	10.9
Reconciliation	19.3	17.1
Tolerance of Uncertainty	28.3	27.5
Persuasion	39.1	32.4
Structure	37.0	32.5
Tolerance of Freedom	34.0	32.5
Role Assumption	41.6	35.9
Consideration	32.1	27.6
Production Emphasis	26.4	22.2
Predictive Accuracy	18.5	15.5
Integration	19.3	15.6
Superior Orientation	29.5	27.2

It is clear that measures of leader behavior among program directors are consistently higher across all dimensions in programs with single peak problem cycles.

In summary, Tichy's framework of organizational problem cycles did serve as a useful method for ordering and analyzing the multiple sources of descriptive data available. It was found that compliance with program mandates and guidelines appears to be influenced by the two phenomena postulated--the problem cycle context of the organization and leader behavior characteristics among program directors attempting to manage or cope with those problem cycle contexts. The implications for social work practice, procedure and assessment would seem substantial.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The information gathering, ordering and analyzing skills useful in social work practice with individuals and groups are likewise useful for the management of human service organizations. They become the bases for discretionary decision making which is necessary for organizational adaptation to environmental conditions. The more information available beyond that at hand when organization and program rules were made, the more discretion in decision making is likely to occur.

An attitude of going by the book takes place in order to promote security in the midst of uncertainty. The capacity to be flexible and adaptable may enable one to use the information available in one's environment to respond to uncertainties and prevent organizational problems from arising. With the existence of relative program stability, discretionary responses to client needs may then also be more possible.

When problems are high, adherence to rules becomes more rigid. Following the rules is often equated with covering one's flanks when multiple uncertainties exist. The experience of tightening rules when problems are increasing is a common one.

The necessity for and advantages of having rules and guidelines is not meant to be ignored. The sense of order and of a predictable program environment for staff and clients is highly valued, particularly for training new staff. One may not know when discretionary decision making may be called for until one understands the basic values and goals intended to be implemented through program guidelines.

Nascent implementation theory is, however, suggesting that policy is often better made by those charged with its implementation. In their study of educational administration, Meyer & Rowan (1977) describe how administrators avoid maintaining controls over day by day

practices of staff so that the inconsistencies between local practices and institutional rules are not discovered. Rowan (1982; 62) explains:

> This maintains the legitimacy of
> external rules, which can work only
> if local personnel are granted
> discretion, avoids the discovery of
> deviance by local personnel, who
> bend external rules to fit the
> local situation, and keeps up
> appearances of local conformity.

Rowan (1982;62) further argues that "formal controls are an inappropriate mode for regulating an uncertain technolgy." This concept certainly applies to human service organizations.

The split found to exist between local procedures and formal controls has critical implications for program assessment and evaluation. Procedures for assessing phenomena beyond rule compliance must be utilized.

In conclusion, discretionary decision making is an obvious extention of contingency theory. In the management of human service organizations, the usefulness of discretionary decision making is to decrease uncertainty, diminish organizational problems and thereby facilitate conditions for responsive human services. To legitimize discretionary decision making would acknowledge the frequent rub between rule compliance and responsive human service delivery. It would also recognize the knowledge, skills and leadership role required of an effective social work administrator.

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