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Rules of thumb for everyday life as
an administrator

Guides to administrator behavior

by Frederick R. Cyphert



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Theories of educational administration, as they should, both describe and explain administrator behavior. They seldom, however, lead to guidelines for preferred practice except perhaps through involved derivations. In an attempt to analyze, and ultimately improve, his own administrative performance, this writer pulled together the following "rules of thumb" that he uses to guide his everyday life as an administrator. They neither flow from nor form some theory of supervision or administration. Most are not original with this author. Their utility for the reader may be as a stimulus for thought and action and for preparing comparable statements for one's own use.

Some Axioms for Guiding Administrative Behavior

1. People support exciting and useful ideas—not needy institutions.
2. We hold our jobs because of what we cause to happen—rather than for what we do. We're paid for the quality of our consequences rather than the amount of our work.
3. Don't whet appetites for anything until you see a reasonable likelihood that the hunger can be satisfied.
4. Ninety per cent of an idea can be developed with the initial ten per cent of effort. It takes the other ninety per cent of the effort to develop the final ten per cent of the idea. Consequently, one must carefully decide which application of effort is appropriate to a given task.
5. Don't answer the specific question posed to you until you have arrived at an answer to the generic question. Only then will you be both consistent and efficient.
6. Think in terms of excellence, and spend your time and effort in the places where they are most likely to bear fruit.
7. No matter how much the people inside of an organization think they control it, most changes come from forces outside of the organization.
8. Communication on the idea level is quite different from cooperation on the action level. Work diligently on the former, and hope for enough of the latter.

9. A good visible project is always better than an equally good hidden endeavor.
10. The power to get things done belongs to those who assume they have it! Don't look for reasons why things can't be done.
11. Never lose your "cool" with administrative subordinates; if you must get angry, focus it on superiors.
12. The man with a plan is the man who wins; to fail to plan is to plan to fail.
13. Try to think a situation through from the other-fellow's point-of-view *before* you formulate your strategy.
14. Good news can be communicated in any fashion; bad news should be communicated face-to-face.
15. Every question has both feasibility and desirability facets. Don't mix the two too quickly, lest you settle for less than you should.
16. Take as long as you need to arrive at your decision—but time spent between a decision and its implementation is time lost.
17. Be extremely careful in selecting those decisions for which you are willing to die. Let the strength of your tenacity match the importance of the principle.
18. Get your reward system in line with your objectives.
19. It's great to inspire the troops with a pep talk—but it won't work for long unless the Boss is working hard himself. Practice what you preach!
20. Don't surprise your colleagues. Lay the groundwork so that your decision (or recommendation) is a logical outgrowth of the information people have.
21. Part of a leader's role is that of picking up the bushes that people hide behind to keep from doing what they need to do. Destroy the obvious excuses.
22. Things seldom happen because of one cause. One can seldom precipitate or cure a happening by manipulating only one variable.
23. The ultimate posture from which one is best able to make productive personal change is one of being "proud but not satisfied."
24. A man would do nothing if he waited until he could do it so well that no one would find fault with what he had done.
25. Build on strengths—your own strengths, those of your superiors, colleagues and subordinates, and the strengths in the situation. Don't build on weakness or start with things you cannot do.
26. Know where your time goes. Work systematically at managing the little of your time that can be brought under control.
27. Concentrate on the few major areas where superior performance will produce outstanding results. Force yourself to set priorities and stay with them. You have no choice but to do first things first and second things not at all.
28. When there is a conflict between what your intellect and logic tell you to do—and what your "gut level" feeling is—postpone the decision. If you must cross the bridge—go with that unexplainable feeling.
29. Examine periodically the assumptions upon which you are operating. This will cause you to discard a few, add a new one and have renewed insight into others.
30. Concentrate on those factors within any situation which are relevant (i.e., make a difference) and which are manipulatable (i.e., you can change them). Disregard the others.
31. Beware of goal displacement, i.e., the tendency to turn away from original goals and to substitute means for ends.
32. Be alert to problem displacement, i.e., the usually unconscious substitution of concern for trivial problems in place of concern for significant problems because the significant problems appear insolvable.
33. Never assume that competence as a scholar and competence as a practitioner are identical.
34. People, more often than not, do what is expected of them. Most people never reach their potential.
35. Both questions and security come from what we know.
36. The key to improvement is knowledge of results. Plan to acquire feedback. Know what you will accept as evidence of success.
37. People do not behave according to the facts as others see them; they behave in terms of what seems to them to be so.
38. The most important ideas which affect people's behavior are those ideas they have about themselves.
39. Know that every problem has both its political and its substantive (or educational) solutions and be able to discern how much of each is proper for each decision.
40. Every time you take an action it precipitates a response or reaction. Watch that cathartic actions don't deepen your problem.

The utility of these "rules of thumb" will differ with the situation and the administrative style of the individual. Like most rules, they may require bending from time to time. They are offered not as a solution to the ambiguities of administrative decision-making, but as an attempt to apply rationality to the dynamic practice of administering educational organizations.