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FUNDAMENTAL ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT WITHIN BUREAUCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract:

The values underpinning performance management in any organization are trust, individual and procedural fairness, constructive feedback, respect and decision-making transparency. However, the very nature of bureaucratic institutions represented by features like job specialization, standardization, rules and procedures, paperwork, record-keeping, and hierarchy of authority may inadvertently generate ethical challenges impeding upon honest and effective performance and henceforth the results of performance evaluation. Consequently, the goal of the current article is to analyze the most challenging situations in bureaucratic institutions from the perspective of performance management, namely human resource performance assessment and evaluation, and make a number of recommendations by which the latter can be reformed.

Key words: bureaucracy, procedural compliance, organizational effectiveness, professional autonomy, discretion, ethical values, accountability, transparency

1. Introduction

The ethical challenges raised by the management of performance in bureaucratic institutions ensue from the rigidity of their hierarchies, the standardization of their processes, and the need to measure outputs rather than outcomes. Lack of accountability on behalf of managers, strict adherence to rules over the needs of the people who should benefit from their application, lack of transparency in decision-making, biases, and favoritism are some of the issues that have transformed the notion of bureaucracy as initially proposed by Weber into a much-argued concept (Weber, 1946; Argyris, 1964; Merton, 1940). Self-regulation of employees, professional discretion in decision-making, initiative, creativity, and entrepreneurship become areas of collusion with the process of bureaucratization itself, as Weber himself describes it (Weber, 1946). This tension between bureaucratic structures and the need for ethical flexibility in decision-making and performance management continues to raise important questions about how best to balance efficiency, fairness, and human well-being within bureaucratic institutions (Wang, 2019; Crozier, 1964).

2. Procedural Compliance over Performance Outcomes

One common practice characteristic of bureaucracies is the prioritization of procedural compliance over performance outcomes. In such cases, performance management is driven by employees' compliance with rules and procedures, while the delivery of meaningful results comes second or can be completely disregarded (Weber, 1946; Merton, 1940). The disconnect that becomes apparent in such cases is between high ratings granted to those who excel at following rules but may



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not necessarily contribute to overall organizational effectiveness and those employees who serve both the letter and the spirit of the same rules (Merton, 1940). The ethical values mostly challenged by such an approach are justice, fairness, accountability, and individuals' wellbeing. In professions like doctors, educators, lawyers, and social workers, high decision-making autonomy is granted by training, expertise, and experience. Therefore, nuanced understanding of contextual factors may call for them to exercise discretion in order to reach better outcomes for their beneficiaries (Lipsky, 1980). However, rigid bureaucratic processes must be followed regardless of context, requiring sometimes that professional integrity and moral agency be disregarded (Simon, 1947).

For example, when a healthcare system is highly centralized and professionals must follow strict guidelines and protocols set in a centralized manner, patients' needs do not necessarily come first. What counts in such a system are numbers, such as the number of surgeries performed or patients treated rather than the quality of healthcare delivery or patient satisfaction (Weber, 1922). Similarly, in educational systems relying on standardized curricula and testing, what is highly rated is the number of students graduating and not the growth of individual students over time, nor the integration of disadvantaged students or the capacity of graduating students to apply the knowledge and skills they acquired and enter a competitive labor market (Weber, 1922; Simon, 1947).

Besides issues related to professional autonomy and integrity, these examples highlight the lack of equity, since focusing on numbers rather than group or individual needs prevents bureaucratic systems from addressing ethnic, gender, or other types of disparities (Scanlon, 1998). Procedural compliance dilutes accountability; therefore, sanctions are applied if, for example, boxes in a process-based checklist are not properly ticked with little to no attention paid to final outcomes. Those at risk in such situations are individuals with urgent needs, such as children from disadvantaged families, communities at risk, or patients who do not fit bureaucratically set eligibility criteria for access to needed medication (Merton, 1940).

Another value heavily impacted by a bureaucratic organization's over-reliance on following procedures is its lack of transparency. Internal processes are not visible to external observers or beneficiaries, whereas tangible results—or lack thereof—are. As a result, lack of clarity and openness may generate the perception of a depersonalized system where people are treated just as mere cogs in a wheel and not as individuals with complex needs and interests. In the long run, trust—a fundamental value for customer-centric organizations—is breached (Blau, 1964; Weick, 1995).

Last but not least, human dignity, empathy, and compassion are also values at risk when procedural compliance prevails over performance-based outcomes. The type of ethic that drives this logic is deontological: the duty to follow the rules is more important than addressing the nuanced effects of the same rules (Kant, 1785). It also branches into legalism—namely, the prioritization of the letter of the law over the spirit of the law—or contractualism, where procedural compliance emerges from social or organizational contracts aimed at providing for the majority's equal treatment while failing to address the needs of underrepresented categories (Scanlon, 1998).

The impact of such approaches can be dire. In the long run, they lead to organizational ineffectiveness, harm to individual needs, and lack of trust in the management of the organization. The end product is the “bureaucratic virtuoso” (Merton, 1940) or “narrow specialists without mind,” according to Weber (1946).

3. Rating Inflation

Bureaucratic organizations are risk-averse and stability is the cornerstone of their existence. Their design is centered on maintaining predictability of processes and results for outside



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stakeholders, as well as internal consistency and order (Crozier, 1964). However, stability may clash with the dynamics of performance management, especially in external environments where economic, socio-cultural, geo-political, and technological changes are the norm rather than the exception (Riccucci, 2002).

Furthermore, the tendency of bureaucratic institutions to employ highly standardized performance evaluation tools that do not necessarily capture nuances in individual performance may lead managers to rate their subordinates very highly to avoid navigating through various constraints or complexity. Additionally, lower ratings may be associated with the possibility of employees appealing decisions, which generates administrative burdens due to required documentation (Golman & Bhatia, 2012). Another feature of bureaucracies is that performance incentives linked to ratings are often limited and sometimes depend on managerial discretion rather than objective results (Sims & Gioia, 1987).

Bureaucratic organizations are also more likely to experience performance rating inflation, particularly when the phenomenon has become a legacy. This inflation raises the baseline for acceptable performance, making honest performance reviews difficult and discouraging deviation from the unwritten norms (Golman & Bhatia, 2012; Sims & Gioia, 1987). This phenomenon helps bureaucracies minimize risks such as budget cuts, avoid scrutiny from higher management or external stakeholders, protect established organizational order, especially when incentives are not strongly linked to performance ratings, and reduce conflicts arising from critical feedback (Fried et al., 1999). At the organizational level, inflated ratings make it difficult to identify underperforming areas and justify resource reallocation. At the individual level, inflated ratings linked to compensation perpetuate the status quo and complicate managerial decision-making (Fried et al., 1999).

The impact of performance rating inflation is manifold. It fosters managerial cynicism and reduces integrity and work ethic. Lack of inter-rater reliability undermines the legitimate link between performance and merit-based pay, eroding employee trust in evaluation systems and lowering morale (Fried et al., 1999). Ethical values challenged by rating inflation include honesty, transparency, fairness, accountability, and integrity, as they affect honest feedback, equitable treatment, and responsible resource allocation.

Some of the ethical values challenged by the phenomenon of performance rating inflation in bureaucratic organizations are:

- honesty – related to how, when, if and why feedback is provided;
- transparency – differences in performance need, at least theoretically, be related to performance improvement plans at the level of employees, increases or decreases in compensation packages and promotion opportunities – all of which require transparent human resource management functions and integrated links among those;
- fairness – regardless of how well or poorly employees perform, they are not differentiated by the ratings they receive – which leads to complacency and decreased efficiency and productivity;
- accountability – poor performers will maintain their behavior if unaddressed by the telltale signs of their performance evaluation ratings, whereas in the case of managers there is no direct impact on their departments when resources are allocated, and
- integrity – the capacity of the overall performance management in an organization, along with the conduct of associated human resource management functions like compensation, career management, professional development are negatively impacted by performance rating inflation.



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4. Patronage Mechanisms

The salient features of a bureaucracy are standardized procedures, clear chain of command, documented decision-making, merit-based promotion and an ethos of professionalism. However, under this veil of procedural legitimacy and objectivity, there is a wide scope for subjectivity rendered by performance evaluation dimensions like talent, teamwork, initiative, and cultural fit, to mention just few. Discretion in the evaluation of all of the above or in the interpretation of their behavioral indicators, personal relationships, and informal networks may predispose the people in charge of performance evaluation in bureaucratic institutions to biases and even flawed conclusions. Additionally, rigid career paths may promote mediocre people over brilliant ones in cases when bureaucratic standardization of career path requires track records highlighting consistency in pursuing a career path over excellence in jobs held over time that can be measured by tangible results (Toral, 2024).

One of the main reasons and consequently challenges in performance evaluation is career advancement. Therefore, the discussion on fundamental challenges to the former cannot be separated from the latter. In this respect, patronage mechanisms like “homosocial reproduction”, “bureaucratic sponsorship”, or “ticket punching” represent practices that do not necessarily agree with the need for objectivity in performance evaluation. Thus, the merit-based approach, even though well documented and institutionalized, may still predispose towards the selection and promotion of people from particular socio-economic backgrounds or graduating from elite educational institutions. The phenomenon is known as “homosocial reproduction” and signals the tendency of decision-makers to favor those resembling themselves. Even though there may be the self-perception that performance evaluation is conducted objectively, biases related to similarities or dissimilarities in terms of educational background, membership in particular social networks or the use of certain communication styles are still likely to prevail (Kanter, 1977; Toral, 2024).

Additionally, “bureaucratic sponsorship” is a practice that reflects how promotion is facilitated in bureaucratic institutions. The concept of mentorship that underlies it may be subverted when the presence of a mentor or sponsor in higher positions favors the promotion of mentees to the detriment of possibly equally meritorious people. Last but not the least, the common practice of “ticket punching” in military – namely obtaining specific assignments that are essential for promotion – often allows people who manage to secure highly coveted positions while not necessarily excelling to be promoted over people who may be equally or even more qualified and with better performance ratings but do not necessarily meet the necessary track record formally agreed for the career path. This phenomenon was notably pervasive during the Vietnam War era, when officers sought brief command or visible staff positions mainly to check career boxes rather than demonstrate leadership competence (New York Times, 1992). Contemporary critiques highlight how rapid job rotations and emphasis on “ticket punching” undermine true operational experience and leadership development, often leading to toxic careerism and inefficiencies in the military personnel system (Kane, 2013).

Patronage systems are more prominent when political connections determine promotion decisions. In such cases, performance evaluation is used as post-hoc evidence of a predetermined outcome. When a candidate is earmarked for career advancement, their performance record is constructed or interpreted to support the decision. Alas, capable employees lacking political support may receive adequate ratings to keep them from advancing regardless of their actual performance. In such cases, the challenge is not only for individuals only, but for organizations themselves. In the



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long run in such organizations leadership quality deteriorates while talent waste and attrition lead to organizational decline and possibly demise on long term (Tiwari, S. et al, 2024).

For example, in the Brazilian public administration system, studies have shown that politically appointed bureaucrats often receive retrospective performance appraisals that emphasize alignment with political goals and responsiveness to elected officials over strict merit-based criteria (Toral, 2024). In practice, this means that once a candidate is identified as having political backing, their performance evaluations are shaped to highlight achievements and downplay shortcomings, effectively legitimizing predetermined promotion decisions.

Similarly, in South Africa’s public sector, political patronage has influenced executive appointments in state-owned enterprises where performance records are selectively presented to justify politically motivated appointments, despite documented inefficiencies and operational failures (Myeza et al., 2024). These examples reveal how bureaucratic performance data can be molded post hoc to fit career trajectories endorsed by political or institutional power structures, which undermines transparency and meritocracy in public administration

5. Personal and Professional Development

Bureaucratic institutions excel at generating piles of performance documentation. Sadly however, performance reviews are not necessarily focused on performance improvement or employees’ professional or personal growth. They are predominantly exercises in form completion, checking boxes, assigning numerical ratings and making sure that the signoff of decision makers certifies fulfillment of procedural requirements. Form over content prevails in bureaucratic organizations and impact valid performance evaluation results. The factors contributing to such a phenomenon could be managers’ self-reportedly lack of time, but also legal and political consequences. In an environment where anything that is documented can be used for filing grievances, appeals or litigation, managers tend to become cautionary about providing negative ratings or precise feedback. Consequently, the ratings and their wording is rather cautious and vague and formulated as ”satisfactory performance” or “meets expectations” (Pandey, 2005).

Also, the typical annual or semi-annual scheduling of performance reviews makes any feedback outdated by the time the evaluation is conducted. Thus, critical incidents throughout a year’s time do not receive the attention that could prompt further improvement on behalf of the employees and the organizations. On the contrary, the rather artificial scheduling of the review does not allow it to address real time aspects and leads to missed opportunities for performance correction and learning (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017).

Bureaucracies are also defined by indeterminate contracts for employees or by tenure systems. That makes performance based termination difficult if not impossible and managers working in such organizational systems do not see value in providing honest feedback. The resulting agreement is that managers do not question employees’ performance, nor do employees challenge managers’ decisions. Such an organizational culture becomes high risk averse and employees learn inadvertently that safe conventional approaches to doing things are always validated. When honest feedback is occasionally provided in such organizations, it comes as a shock and is perceived as unfair. Furthermore, if honest feedback is provided irregularly and is not followed by professional or personal development actions, it is perceived as bias rather than an opportunity for improvement (Rauch, 2000).

The professions where feedback contributes extensively to development are those where expertise is the result of continuous learning like in education, healthcare, or social work. Quality



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assurance inherent in those makes feedback as a means for personal and professional development a pillar for individual and organizational growth (Bovaird & Löffler, 2021).

6. Recommendations and Conclusions

The ethical challenges identified in this article represent some of the most common issues that employees working in bureaucratic organizations face. The need for structure and consistency which are the salient features of the Weberian bureaucracy remains. However, the contemporary environment where technology generates major disruptions, people are more mobile than ever and the new generations of employees value development and flexibility requires achieving balance between the need for standardization and flexibility, the creation of accountability mechanisms for managers, building or consolidating transparent appeals processes, training on ethical decision-making, and last but not the least periodic audits of rating systems and their recalibrations.

Concerning the dilemma of balancing procedural compliance with outcome accomplishment, the nature of a profession should be the primary criterion by which to prioritize performance indicators. Thus, for jobs where following protocols matters, that should be the primary evaluation criteria. On the other hand, in work environments where professional judgment, adaptation to circumstances, autonomy matter more than compliance, the latter should be only used as a baseline, whereas the former should carry more weight in performance evaluation. To that end, well established discretion based decision-making frameworks could better serve the ultimate purposes of performance evaluation. That would entail principle based policies focused on allowing flexibility that can be assumed based on clear and unequivocal documentation of exceptions. Additionally, the review and update of procedures should be done on a regular basis and based on just-in-time methodology. With a view to that, it is not only employees who should be empowered to flag those procedures that hinder their effectiveness in achieving performance objectives and outcomes, but the processes for addressing their concerns should be streamlined to allow for fast decision-making and appropriate changes of counterproductive policies, rules, regulations or practices.

Accountability and transparency are the litmus test for ethical decision-making in any organization. Managers can be made accountable for their employees' performance evaluations through a consequence based system inbuilt in their own performance evaluation criteria. Their future career path, as well as their professional development should also be linked to the quality of their performance evaluations, their feedback skills or biases they might demonstrate. In this respect, evaluators should also be evaluated on the quality, specificity and developmental value of the feedback they provide. Focusing the evaluators' evaluation on how their employees' assessment contributes to development rather than to mere documentation of employees' performance adequacy or inadequacy is another course of action that could be taken. Additionally, accountability as a requirement to document the ratings that are above average could be a solution especially in a performance management system where rating inflation might be a phenomenon that is not necessarily controlled, or for which mandatory distribution guidelines may do more harm than good for high performing teams and individuals.

Managers' biases and discretionary behavior in evaluating their subordinates' performance can be addressed through appeal mechanisms and external review panels that can ensure fairness and transparency. For those to properly work, clear requirements for performance evaluation substantiation must exist and be applied both for initial evaluations and for appeals. Additionally, timeliness in addressing appeals is essential in order not to impede both managers' and employees' ongoing work.



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One of the key factors contributing to finding better solutions to situations where the need for procedural compliance clashes with the need for outcome focused performance is managers training in the ethical challenges of performance evaluation. That can be done on the job through scenario based approaches or with the support of peers and human resource ethics advisors.

Last but not the least, the quality of any performance evaluation system needs to be assessed whether it is still fit for purpose. With a view to that, regular data collection is required in order to allow timely analysis of performance ratings across units and demographics. The goal is to identify patterns in ratings, possible disparities among units performing similar functions or demographic differences.

In conclusion, the ethical challenges raised by performance management in bureaucratic institutions are not inevitable. They are the consequence of the tension between the basic tenets of what a bureaucracy needs to provide, and the need to adapt to nowadays' realities. Performance management can be done ethically, preserving the integrity of the organization, processes and individuals if it is not regarded as just a box checking exercise. That necessitates allocation of necessary resources, embeddedness of an outcome focused performance management approach into organizational culture and willingness coupled with action towards overcoming entrenched practices.

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