

The scenarios and the wider world

What these snippets of life inside school administrations reveal is just how varied the approach to administration is in schools across the UK. The causes of such variation are numerous, and they include:

- **Personnel:** dominant people with set views can control the way things are done and can prevent open debate on alternative procedures. Even if “prevention” is too strong a word, it is possible for dominant people to influence the way in which everyone behaves so that discussion of alternative approaches is simply unthinkable.
- **History:** one way or another the school’s administration was set up in a particular format, and the structure has remained much the same ever since. There is no history of debate, and so no debate happens – at least until a strong-minded person joins the team and starts raising questions, and carries on doing so despite the strange looks.
- **Buildings:** different buildings place different demands on the way work is undertaken. Matters can often be changed, but it can be a lot harder to rearrange working practices in rooms that are utterly inflexible.
- **Lack of exchange of ideas:** while teachers go on training days, attend conferences and have newspapers, magazines and journals which explore alternative perspectives, little of this applies to administrators. There is no administrative equivalent of the Guardian’s education pages on Tuesday or the Times Educational Supplement on Friday. Indeed, until the NCSL started its courses for bursars followed by the SEAM with its Certificate in Educational Administration course, there was virtually nothing on offer that would ever bring business managers and administrators together. Given that many schools have only one or two administrators in them this lack of communication can be catastrophic.
- **Lack of movement:** although some teachers stay in post for many years, many others move jobs in order to gain promotion. Some administrators do move, but the tendency overall seems to be to far less movement than among teaching staff. Clearly movement between jobs offers an opportunity for new ideas to spread and, where there is little such movement, things have a tendency to stagnate.

The combination of these problems has meant that while some schools have explored new ways forward, many others have stagnated in organisational terms. Of course it is quite clear that all school administrations have changed in some regard – the advent of computerisation along with a dramatic increase in the financial responsibilities of the school and the information requirements from government have ensured this. But it is fair to say that the amount of change that takes place in school administrations is often far less than the change that takes place in the schools that the administrators administer.

To see this more clearly we might consider this comparison. If we were to travel back in time to the 1970s and visit a supermarket we would find ourselves in a totally different environment from that which we see today. Not only would the computerisation be missing (each item being clicked up individually on a cash machine that requires amounts of money to be entered), but the whole layout of the shop, the choice, the way prices are written, the lighting, the signage, the way assistants are used, the checkout system and the range of non-food products were all radically different.

If however we were to compare the school office in some (and I do stress some) schools in the 1970s with that of today, the situation would be nowhere near so different. Indeed, if we discount the issue of computerisation, there would be very few changes visible. Not only would the look of the place be familiar, so would the activities of the administrators. While some administrators would undoubtedly be undertaking different tasks (for example gathering data as required by government) the general approach to administration would look much the same.

To take one specific example of how things have not changed: in 1975 most administrators in schools undertook a whole variety of jobs, moving from one to another and on to another, facing endless interruptions to the tasks. That is much the same today.

Now of course an administrator can immediately say, “That is the nature of the job – the essence of what we do,” but my argument back would be that it does not have to be so. It could be that this is the format you have accepted and which has become the norm – but it doesn’t have to be like this.

Change is a central issue in this report as it is in virtually all books and reports that deal with the way organisations work. The society in which we live is changing faster than ever before, and the speed of change is still increasing year on year. For those of us old enough to remember such things, change is easy to see. We may be able to remember the first mobile phones – huge affairs that required a power pack almost as big as a car battery – and indeed we might remember the days BEFORE mobile phones. We might even remember the first fax machines and the days before the first PC appeared when if we had a computer at all it was an Apple II with 5.25” disks. But it is not just technology that changes; it is behaviour at both the social and individual level. And expectations change: the quality of life we expect, the way we expect young people to behave, the way we expect our boss to behave, the entertainment we expect to enjoy in our leisure time, and so on.

And yet some parts of the world seem not to have changed that much at all. I have already suggested that school administration might be one of these parts that have seen relatively little change – but it is not the only one. If we think of the GP’s surgery, in many cases patients with long enough memories will realise that the experience of visiting the GP in 1970 was pretty much like visiting the GP in 2006: telephoning for an appointment, the busy signal on the phone, the waiting room, the abrupt and factually incorrect answering machine message (telling you that the surgery opens at 9am, when you are phoning at 9.10am), the delay beyond the appointed consultation time with no explanation given and no estimation of how long one might have to wait, the brief consultation and the prescription. Of course some surgeries have moved on, but some have not.

But some have changed. Most GP surgeries now have all their records scanned in and accessible at once through computers – a much more efficient system, and with the back up of a couple of hard drives held off site, much more secure, since there is no further risk of loss through file or misfiling. Some surgeries now operate telephone consultancy – the patient phones the GP, gets a call back, and as a result the surgeries personal appointments are reduced by 80%.

In schools however the speed of change has been reduced and it is perhaps tempting at this point to consider arguing that a major factor in the lack of change in the school office is the building, one of the factors mentioned at the start of this article. It has indeed often been put to me that, “we would love to make changes, but in these buildings it simply isn’t possible”. My answer is twofold.

Firstly, even though buildings are a restriction on how we lay out our office they are not a restriction on how we think – on how we see our job – and the advent of computerisation has meant that much work can be done in all sorts of places that were previously impossible.

Secondly, in the debate a few years back concerning the schools of the future, there was virtually no consideration of the school administration within this context beyond the fact that on some plans a vaguely defined zone called the school office is shown. Indeed, when the government launched its plans I wrote to the department asking where the debate on the location of the administration was taking place, and I was told it wasn't. This was a debate about teaching and learning, I was told, not about administration, where it begins and where it ends. Since then nothing has changed.

And that leads me to my main point – my main point not only within this chapter, but within this whole report.

Administration in all organisations exists somewhere in between three extreme positions. These positions are visions of administration and, like all visions, different people within any organisation can adopt any of these different visions, or indeed variations on them. If everyone adopts the same vision then that is where the administration is and it tends to run very smoothly because of this agreement. Indeed, this is what often happens when no one thinks very much about the administration at all; everyone slips into what has become the dominant vision, which then is seen to be natural and obvious. Any questioning of this obvious position is itself seen to be bizarre, eccentric or something that “might work somewhere else but wouldn't work here.” In short, the variation simply feels wrong.

However, if different people within the administration adopt different positions then certain tensions can arise. If there is openness and goodwill on all sides a debate can ensue and change can happen. If, however, some parties adopt an entrenched view and challenge the ideas of others, or even the right of those who seek to change to debate the matter or the whole concept of change itself, then the tensions build until someone gives up their standard position.

Thus change management is a key question for almost every administration. If everyone agrees on the current position, the administration can run smoothly, but change becomes very hard to institute simply because no one is challenging the current approach. If, however, different perspectives already exist, argument can surround all suggestions for change, and entrenched positions can make it hard to bring the whole team together.

Further problems can arise when those outside the administration – the teachers, managers and governors, for example – adopt one vision of administration while those working in administration have a different viewpoint.

In all these scenarios it is important to recognise not just the positions being adopted but also the dynamics of trying to achieve change within such situations.

So, bearing in mind the problems of change, here are the three extreme views of school administration. The third of these views actually splits into two groups when examined closely, so one could say there are four visions. But we'll deal with them as three initially as this is how they tend to be seen from the outside.

1. Administration as tedious computer work with some paperwork on the side

In this vision administration is a necessity, but a low level one. The work of administration is intellectually undemanding and unstimulating. No one with any sort of brain would get involved in it; it is a job for those who like working indoors but can't find anything else to do.

Administration in this scenario is thought of as filing, filling in forms and deciding virtually nothing; decision-making is for people with brains. When something goes wrong (as when, for example, equipment is not in the right place, photocopied pages are not in the right order, letters are not sent out on the right day) the first question raised will be along the lines of “just how much brain power is needed to get something this simple right?”

Non-administrators have no real notion of why anyone would go into administration – but if they are forced to consider the issue they would probably suggest administrators might have a personality that leads them to want a quiet life, an ordered existence and the absence of challenge.

2. Administration as bureaucracy

Bureaucracy, in the popular mind, is what happens when people with too much brainpower find themselves involved in tedious paperwork. Whereas the bright people with creative minds are quite properly at the sharp end of the job, the bureaucrats are that most frightening concept: paper-pushers who have started to think.

Being bored with the existence in the office, bureaucrats seek to change the world first by inventing ever more complex administrative systems, and then by attempting to stop all attempts to change anything that would challenge the system they have invented. So whereas teachers once upon a time could order a book by filling in a publisher’s order form and dropping it into the post tray, the requirement now is for official order forms and counter signatures. Where once anyone could carry equipment from one room to another and set it all up, now you have to book everything in and follow a series of health and safety procedures.

The job of the bureaucrat, in the popular mind, is basically to stop anything happening and to ensure that the bureaucrats have a wonderful, peaceful, simple life. We now have in our language the phrase “Sir Humphrey” to signify such a person – although maybe that is now gradually fading away. But many remember the endless attempts by the fictional Jim Hacker both as Minister for Administrative Affairs and later as Prime Minister to get anything done in the face of the smothering influence of his resident bureaucrat.

Bureaucrats are self-serving. They put their personal interests and views above those of the organisation. They have stopped serving their “masters” (politicians in the world of Hacker and Sir Humphrey, teachers and managers in the world of the school), and have evolved into creatures who only serve themselves.

3. a) Administration as facilitators – unplanned response

The administrator as facilitator is an image that goes no further than recognising them as friendly people in the office who actually do what is asked. The teacher comes in, says, “the photocopier in the staff room isn’t working – could you get it fixed, please” and the facilitator gets it sorted. The facilitator has no independent thought but simply responds to requests – but unlike the paper-pushers in the first version of administrators, they actually get on and do it.

The requests made of the facilitators are obvious and straightforward and require no independent thought – you look up the phone number of the company that repairs the photocopier and tell them it is broken. But these simple souls get some pleasure out of solving each little task, so it is always worth popping in to see them and having a chat.

However, the role of administration as facilitator tends to be fairly unstable and often is seen by outsiders to develop either into bureaucracy or into a fourth option – the facilitator operating a model of “planned response”.

To outsiders “Administration as Facilitators” actually means *Administration as an Unplanned Response Team*. This vision leaves the facilitator responding to each demand as it occurs: you want the photocopy repair man called out – the administrator will do it; a parent wants an appointment with the head – the administrator fixes one up; the dinner money needs counting – the administrator will count it. Each job is done as it occurs, without any particular thought as to how it is done. In the last case the dinner money might need counting every Thursday, so maybe an extra member of the admin team is made available then – so there is a bit of pre-planning, but that’s about it.

3.b) Administration as facilitator – planned response

Administration which uses planned response is different however. It involves the head of administration, or indeed the whole admin team, looking at many of the things they are asked to do, and then thinking about how it could be done more effectively. So in a planned response environment the admin team might say, “All the dinner money is collected on a Thursday, which puts quite a strain on us for undertaking any other work that crops up on a Thursday. If each year group could collect the money on a different day, that would spread the load.” Or, “Teachers pop in here and tell us the photocopier is broken, but half the time we have no idea what is wrong with it. So why don’t we have a set of forms by the photocopier and, if the machine fails, the teacher has to fill the form in completely. Then we have a greater chance of being able to tell the repair company what is wrong, and they might actually turn up with the right parts. We can also put a notice on the copier, and on the office door, that we will not call up the repair company without such a form being filled in.”

A new possibility – the administrator as initiator

To many people either inside or outside administration, the administrator as initiator is hardly known. In the UK, administrators who move into initiating procedures are often given new titles, and can end up being called managers. In the US, the process (in education at least) works the other way round. The administrators include what we in the UK would call managers.

Administrators as initiators do occur in the UK, however, particularly in successful business enterprises – and where administration does become a part of the working environment it can have a radical effect. The only problem is that it is considered by many who are focussed on the three main approaches to school administration in the UK to be so odd – so alien even – and so challenging, that they simply cannot understand it or see how it might work.

And yet the administrator as initiator is not such a radical change as it might seem from the outside, for all it does is take the true meaning of the bureaucrat and put it into a contemporary context.

To see this working in practice, let us return for a moment to one of the fun inventions of the 1990s – the mission statement. For a while we all had to have one, whether we were a multinational corporation, a government department or a school. The mission statement supposedly incorporated exactly what we were about: our aims set out in a way that everyone could understand.

The only trouble with the mission statement was that it tended to occupy a lot of minds (that really ought to have been doing something more helpful) over quite a few months without actually making too much difference to the output of the organisation. After it had been

launched, put on the web site, in the prospectus and quite probably on the school notice-board, it then tended to be forgotten. I am sure there are still schools that dutifully refer back to their mission statement, and even consider each year if it needs updating, but I believe these are in the minority. I know of a number where the mission statement was ultimately abandoned as irrelevant, and people now look back and wonder how they could have wasted quite so much time on such a silly idea.

However the mission statement, pointless exercise though it was for many organisations, did have one value. It did make the people who dreamed up the statement think about what the overall point of the organisation was.

Let us take an example of a school mission statement which I have selected at random from those published on the internet. Here are a few extracts. In this case the school is saying that its mission is to ensure:

- That every pupil fulfils his or her academic potential.
- That teachers and pupils pursue excellence in teaching and learning.
- That our pupils develop a love of learning, both individually and with others, and acquire a wide range of learning skills.
- That we create an environment in which pupils are confident in their ability and increasingly ready to take responsibility for their own learning.
- That every pupil receives excellent pastoral care within an ethos of tolerance and mutual respect rooted in Christian values.
- That pupils develop relationships with peers and adults in a way that prepares them for life beyond school.
- That pupils acquire a sense of responsibility and self-discipline.
- That pupils benefit from a wide range of opportunities for leadership and the management of others.
- That our pupils participate in a variety of physical activities and experience a sense of well-being and self-confidence that arises from good health and fitness.
- That our pupils benefit from a comprehensive personal and social education that helps them to lead happy and fulfilling lives.
- That we provide a varied range of activities beyond the curriculum.
- That pupils discover and develop their own skills and interests at school in preparation for adult life.
- That all pupils be adventurous and participate in a range of activities, appreciating the rewards of teamwork.

- That all pupils be given the opportunity for personal achievement and fulfilment in a way befitting their own aspirations.
- That our pupils develop a moral, spiritual and aesthetic awareness that makes them receptive to the world around them, bringing with it a sense of wonder and openness to the most important ideas in our own and other cultures.
- That the school recognises the crucial importance of its staff in pursuing the aims above and, as a good employer, undertakes to provide them with appropriate support such as continuing professional training, review and development.

To me this is all good stuff. Obviously if one is from a non-religious background, or if one is a member of a non-Christian religion, you might have difficulty with one or two parts of this, but I suspect most people in the UK are going to feel at ease with these bullet points as the basis for a schooling system.

But then what? The issue facing the school is to transform these highly laudable and acceptable aims and desires into a practical system that delivers these aims. What we have to do is make it happen. But how?

It is at this point that the school has a choice. It can on the one hand say to its teachers, “make it happen” and then forget about it. Or maybe the senior management team, who direct the school’s drive towards these ends, takes the mission statement on board and constantly refers back to it. As a result of this unified approach there will be progress in the course of which administrative demands occur. In this model the administrative team then respond to these demands. In such a school we would expect that they will be using the third approach to administration that we outlined above – viewing their administrators not just as paper-pushers or bureaucrats, but as facilitators who are either operating under the “planned response” or “unplanned response” model.

So here we have the aims of the school drawn up in a mission statement, and then the senior management decide how to fulfil these aims. It is surely obvious that if the administration is represented in these meetings, the facilitators will be able to do their job far better, by making sure that they are operating as a planned response rather than an unplanned response unit.

Suddenly this gives a whole new meaning and new possibility to the mission statement. For example the notion that “every pupil fulfils his or her academic potential” clearly requires that teachers know what the academic potential of each child is, so that they can know how to proceed when a child reaches a certain level. (If no one knows what the academic potential of a child is, it is impossible to know if one is achieving the mission statement’s intent of fulfilling that potential – and if we don’t know if we are succeeding or not, it is rather hard to run the organisation in any meaningful sense.)

So, if we have a child who is predicted to get a “4” (the old “C”) in dual science at GCSE the teacher will need to know if this is the academic potential of this child in this subject, or whether in fact the child has the potential to achieve a higher grade and is in fact just being lazy.

In other words the teacher needs information and that information has to come from somewhere; it has to be gathered together and presented in a form that the teacher can readily use. You don’t want to overburden the teacher with the task of finding that information; you want to give it to the teacher in a clear and concise manner.