

## *Feedback in Administration*

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*Feedback is essential for rational decision making and is a necessary ingredient of an administrative climate attuned to attaining organizational objectives. Yet administrators at all levels in an organization must make decisions without having adequate information about the consequences of these decisions. Feedback is discussed as a tool in providing information for administrative decision making. Some of the problems are analyzed and suggestions made to increase adequacy of feedback.*

ADMINISTRATORS have substantial control over the conditions under which organizational personnel perform. They control the resources; they coordinate personnel activities. Their decisions go far toward determining the organization's success in reaching its professed objectives.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this responsibility, administrators are continually faced with the necessity of performing their roles without adequate information about the consequences of their decisions regarding the organization's procedures and programs of activities. Particularly in those organizations dealing with relatively intangible products and goals, the feedback mechanism so essential to rational decision making is inadequate. The result is administration by guesswork—conscientious, careful, insightful, and in accordance with traditional leadership practices, perhaps, but guesswork nonetheless.

Writers on the subject of administrative decision making generally recognize the necessity of feedback.<sup>2</sup> Most practicing administrators undoubtedly do too, but the information actually available is

<sup>1</sup>W. Keith Warner and A. Eugene Havens, "Goal Displacement and the Intangibility of Organizational Goals," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Miami Beach, Florida, August 29-September 1, 1966.

<sup>2</sup>See Rensis Likert, *New Patterns of Management* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1961), p. 13 and Chs. 5, 13; Herbert A. Thelen, *Dynamics of*

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far from sufficient for very rational leadership choices. Yet decisions must be made, and administrators make them with whatever information is available. It is not always possible or desirable to wait for an extensive study to produce better data.<sup>3</sup>

While there are no methods available for eliminating all uncertainty in the administration of organizations, considerably more adequate methods are available than typically are used. The following discussion deals with (1) feedback and its function as a tool in providing information for administrative decision making; (2) some of the problems involved in developing useful feedback mechanisms in organization.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF FEEDBACK

First of all, it is important to recognize that feedback is an important concern of *all* organizational personnel, and not just the top administrators. Feedback is *about* the activities and results of performance of each individual, as well as of groups or departments. Thus, the person will want to understand what information is being obtained about him, how it will be used, and why.

Second, plans and activities of various personnel could be improved by using the information obtained from the feedback process. In addition to being affected by decisions from higher administration, individuals at every level of the organization may receive information for use in their own decision making. Therefore, personnel need to understand the information and know how best to use it.

And, closely related, each person in the organization is a kind of administrator with responsibility for someone's activities. This formal responsibility may be limited to one's own actions and programs, or may extend to large numbers of individuals. In either case, responsibility for action requires decisions, which require adequate information. Thus, each person in the organization has reason to understand and be concerned about feedback. However, the higher in the hierarchy a person is, the greater are his opportunities

*Groups at Work* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1954), pp. 188-91; Joseph A. Litterer, *The Analysis of Organizations* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1965), Ch. 13; John M. Pfiffner and Frank P. Sherwood, *Administrative Organization* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1960), pp. 106, 298-99; and Francis C. Byrnes, "Communications in Formal Organizations," in Robert C. Clark and Roland H. Abraham (eds.), *Administration in Extension* (Madison, Wisconsin: National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study, 1960), pp. 163-74.

<sup>3</sup> Frank D. Alexander, "A Critique of Evaluation," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, III (Winter, 1965), 212.

and responsibilities for initiating, supporting, and using adequate feedback mechanisms and processes.

It is important to note that this paper deals with particular kinds of organizations—those with relatively intangible goals and products<sup>4</sup> (e.g., schools, churches, voluntary associations, Extension Services). When major goals and products of the organization are less concrete or tangible, problems of feedback are more acute. And that is when administrative decision making is done with less adequate information about the consequences.

In business and industrial firms where goods and services are material or measurable in dollars, feedback mechanisms are important parts of the organizational structure. Financial accounting systems are major examples. They do not measure, record, and report *all* relevant information about the effects of organizational activity, but they do deal with aspects centrally important for the major goals. The quality control process is another example of feedback.

By contrast, in organizations with intangible goals and products, financial accounting systems do *not* deal with measurements which indicate the amount or quality of goal attainment or productivity. They deal with peripheral matters. There is no other system which performs the functions of measuring and recording that accounting performs for the administration of profit-oriented enterprises.

If a business firm had no accounting system, how would its administrators know the consequences of the organization's activities? How would they know whether programs were yielding desired results, or just the opposite? How would they know whether their products were worth the cost? These questions illustrate the kinds of difficulties confronting administrative decision making in organizations with intangible goals and products.

#### THE NATURE OF FEEDBACK

In this discussion, "feedback" refers to the measurement of the consequences of organizational activity, and the communication of the resulting information back to those responsible for making decisions which guide that activity. This apparently needs to be a fairly frequent and regular process rather than sporadic or occasional. The frequency depends upon the kind of information involved.

The concept of "evaluation" is closely related to what is called "feedback" in this paper. Both terms are frequently used to describe

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of implications of the intangibility of professed goals for organizational goal attainment, evaluation, and sanctioning, see Warner and Havens, *op. cit.*

processes involved in determining the consequences of activities and programs. For example, discussions of evaluation by Alexander<sup>5</sup> and Frutchey<sup>6</sup> refer to obtaining information quite similar to that discussed in this paper. There seem to be some important differences in the two processes, but clarification of these is beyond the purpose of the present discussion.

### *Categories of Feedback Information*

Administrators are concerned with two broad sets of purposes: (1) attaining the organization's professed goals, or productivity; and (2) maintaining and building the organization and its programs. For each set of purposes, the planners and decision makers need to know: (1) to what extent it is being accomplished, and (2) to what extent the means or processes for working toward each set of purposes are being implemented. (Information from these categories can also serve as a basis for conclusions about the appropriateness of the means-ends design of the organizational policies and programs.) As shown in Figure 1, these groupings reveal four broad categories of feedback information.<sup>7</sup>

Kinds of Information Needed	Areas of Feedback Information	
	Productivity or Goal Attainment	Organizational Maintenance
Degree of Accomplishment	CATEGORY A Sample question: What is the amount and quality of productivity or the attainment of professed goals?	CATEGORY B Sample question: To what extent is the organization being maintained, weakened, or strengthened?
	CATEGORY C Sample question: To what extent are policies, plans, and programs of activities being carried out which are designed for productivity or attainment of professed goals?	CATEGORY D Sample question: To what extent are policies, plans, and programs of activities being carried out which are designed for maintaining and building the organization?

Figure 1. Categories of feedback information relevant to administrative decision making.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Fred P. Frutchey, "Evaluation—What It Is," in Darcie Byrn (ed.), *Evaluation in Extension* (Topeka, Kansas: H. M. Ives & Sons, Inc., no date), Ch. 1.

<sup>7</sup> For other formulations of categories, see Chester W. Harris, "The Appraisal

The first category (A) consists of data about the amount and quality of productivity or goal attainment. This does not refer to how the organization is growing, or how hard the personnel are working. When the products of the organization include changes in persons' attitudes and knowledge, these changes are indicators of productivity. When the products include development of people's skills in problem solving or democratic planning, this development is the indicator of productivity. It will not be sufficient to count how many meetings the members or clients attended, how many projects they participated in, or how many organization leaders or professional agents tried to help them. In these examples, the results are the changes in people, not what somebody did in the hope of bringing these changes about.

Category B concerns maintenance and growth of the organization and its programs. This refers to more than sheer survival; it refers to the internal state of the group, including personnel loyalty and morale, level of personnel training and skills as they relate to tasks to be done, flexibility of the organization in adapting to changes in clientele or sources of support, etc. The question is to what degree the strength, vitality, and usefulness of the organization is being maintained over the long run. How can this be measured and reported? For example, one indication of the solidarity of the organization is personnel turnover—how many are leaving. But are there measures which will tell administrators how well the organization is doing without having to lose personnel first? The answer is yes.<sup>8</sup>

The remaining two categories refer to how completely the policies and programs, or means, designed to reach those objectives actually have been implemented. Category C refers to information regarding the extent to which the organization is implementing the means which are designed to insure goal attainment or productivity. For example, program planning is widely accepted in Extension as a process for increasing productivity.<sup>9</sup> The measurement in Category

of a School—Problems for Study," *Journal of Educational Research*, XLI (November, 1947), 175-76; and Edward A. Suchman, "A Model for Research and Evaluation on Rehabilitation," in Marvin B. Sussman (ed.), *Sociology and Rehabilitation* (Washington, D.C.: American Sociological Assoc., no date), pp. 68-69.

<sup>8</sup>Likert (*op. cit.*, pp. 192-95) discusses some measurable characteristics of organizations. Examples of methods of measuring various organizational attributes can be seen in Delbert C. Miller, *Handbook of Research Design and Social Measurement* (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1964).

<sup>9</sup>Consider Patrick G. Boyle, *The Program Planning Process: With Emphasis on Extension* (Madison, Wisconsin: National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study, December, 1965); and Gale L. VandeBerg, *Total Resource Development in Wisconsin: A Citizens' Guide to Plans and Action* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Extension Service, October, 1963).

C would determine how completely, how skillfully, how adequately the process is conducted. It may also appraise the utility of the resulting plan as a tool for reaching the announced objectives.

Category D includes information about the degree to which the organization is implementing the policies and procedures for maintaining and building the size, strength, internal unity, vitality, and other aspects of the organizational unit. Examples of measures of this kind would include appraisal of any campaigns for membership recruitment, procedures for obtaining resources for programs, and policies of promotion or payment of personnel.

Some organizational activities fit into more than one category, and some may be hard to classify. The point of using these categories is to provide a way of discussing some of the crucial differences in the kind of information administrators need in their planning and decision making. This scheme also helps in discussing some of the problems encountered in developing adequate feedback mechanisms, and in drawing reasonable conclusions from the resulting data.

#### *Variations in Adequacy of Feedback*

At least three dimensions to the adequacy of feedback information can be identified. First, its *completeness* can vary. Some organizations may obtain only a little information regarding one category, while others may obtain substantial amounts from all four categories. Some information from each of the four categories is essential, and having considerable from each would be helpful.

Second, the *frequency* of feedback measurement and reporting can vary. Some recording and reporting is done regularly and often, while only on rare and special occasions are more basic determinations made of the effects of fundamental programs or purposes. Data collection for "routine" decisions tends to be more frequent and regular; that for "critical" leadership decisions, like the decisions themselves, tends to be a more sporadic and special event.<sup>10</sup>

With respect to both completeness and frequency, it appears that in most current organizations the major effort goes into providing information in Categories C and D, which refer to *means* of accomplishing the two general sets of purposes of the organization. Probably next in order of attention is Category B, which includes information on the degree to which the organization is being maintained

<sup>10</sup> These kinds of decisions are discussed in Philip Selznick, *Leadership in Administration: A Sociological Interpretation* (Evanston, Illinois: Row, Peterson & Co., 1957), Ch. 2.

and strengthened. Grossly neglected in organizations with intangible goals is measurement of goal attainment, or degree of productivity. Yet information of this sort is especially crucial.

There is a tendency to concentrate upon events and characteristics which are more tangible and more easily measured. This can lead to unintended results. When decisions are guided primarily by information regarding organizational maintenance, as tends to be the case in groups with intangible goals, it is difficult to make adjustments in organizational operation necessary to increase productivity.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, when information is primarily concerned with productivity, as in business and industrial firms, decisions regarding organizational maintenance may suffer.<sup>12</sup>

The third dimension in variation of feedback adequacy is *reliability* and *validity*. Organizations often rely upon estimates made by persons with little training for making such observations, although some groups may utilize information derived from carefully constructed scales developed by professionally trained personnel.

Many of the goals which guide the kind of organizations being discussed in this paper involve creating particular patterns of human organization, and bringing about changes in people's attitudes and actions. To be sure, many useful observations and judgments about such matters, as well as about organizational maintenance procedures, can be made on a more informal basis by experienced personnel. The value of data from this source should not be underestimated, and steps should be taken to strengthen this source of information.

Nevertheless, measurement of these patterns and changes is a technical and complicated process, and cannot be done with much validity and reliability by persons who lack proper training. There is a body of methodology available in the social sciences for making measurements of this kind.<sup>13</sup> While far from perfect, it is also far from guesswork.

The foregoing discussion has implied that feedback is sometimes based upon superficial judgments of things which could be measured more reliably and validly. Of course, whether more systematic processes would be worth their cost is also an important administrative decision. Two other deficiencies are apparent along the dimension of reliability and validity: (1) distortion of information reported to the administration, and (2) use of information from one

<sup>11</sup> Warner and Havens, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Likert (*op. cit.*, pp. 72-76) describes some financial rewards which are sometimes given for weakening the organization. The reason is that the decisions regarding the rewards are based upon inadequate measurements.

<sup>13</sup> A brief overview is given in Miller, *op. cit.*

category to answer the questions regarding a different category.

There is some tendency for communication and reports to administration to be distorted.<sup>14</sup> A chief reason is the problem of information being used for evaluative purposes, as well as for the direction and coordination of programs of activities. Persons try to protect their own interests by making the reports at least reasonably similar to what they think administrators want.

A fairly common error in interpretation and use can be seen in the misapplication of information from one category to answer questions in another. For example, the degree of productivity or goal attainment (Category A) cannot be measured by determining growth of organizational membership or clientele (B), or by the diligence with which programs are planned and implemented to bring about increased organizational strength, unity, or productivity (C and D). Yet this is done. Furthermore, many of the kinds of things which are assessed by organizations are *presumed* causes of productivity; administrators *think* those programs will lead to successful group performance.<sup>15</sup> But it is obvious from results attained by many groups that those assumptions are very much in need of testing.

In view of these aspects of feedback adequacy, it is useful to consider the application of electronic data processing methods to organizational reporting systems. Deppen describes one such system.<sup>16</sup> The capabilities of computers make it practical to utilize far greater quantities of data, and to process this information rapidly into useful material for decision making.

However, significant issues about present systems of reporting include not only the speed with which reports are processed and the degree to which they are used in important decision making, but also their *content*. More rapid and thorough processing of data would still not make the content of present reports in most organizations adequate for very rational decision making. Getting adequate information to put into the computers in the first place is a problem that computers cannot solve, although administrators in an organization can.

<sup>14</sup> Chadwick J. Haberstroh, "Organization Design and Systems Analysis," in James G. March (ed.), *Handbook of Organizations* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1965), p. 1183; Harold Guetzkow, "Communications in Organizations," in March, *op. cit.*, pp. 551-58; and Byrnes, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

<sup>15</sup> Harris, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Marion R. Deppen, "Utilizing Report Information," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, IV (Summer, 1966), 103-108. Also see Likert, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-11; and William R. Dill, "Administrative Decision-Making," in Sidney Mailick and Edward H. Van Ness (eds.), *Concepts and Issues in Administrative Behavior* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), pp. 41-42.

## PROBLEMS IN OBTAINING AND USING FEEDBACK

Why do administrators continue to operate with inadequate information about the effects of organizational policies and programs? A few reasons can now be suggested.

*Problems of Motivation*

Decision makers are, in many cases, not motivated to seek adequate feedback information. For one reason, they and other organizational personnel tend to doubt the possibility of measuring such things as goal attainment or productivity, organizational unity, personnel morale, or the consequences of an administrative policy.<sup>17</sup> While committed to organizational programs designed to change human behavior in particular ways, and to the belief that these changes are desirable, these persons doubt the possibility of reliable and valid identification and measurement of those changes. Even granting the possibility of such measurement, they doubt whether such information would be worth what it cost.

Another reason is the lack of necessity. Administrators can get along without adequate feedback. Traditional leadership practice does not require very complete feedback information in organizations with intangible goals and products. Persons and agencies who invest resources in the organization would like to have objective measurements assuring them of the results of organizational operation, but apparently are willing to accept estimates, guesswork, and figures dealing with organizational maintenance and presumed causes rather than with actual consequences.<sup>18</sup>

Persons sometimes believe that such information poses some threat to the interests of organizational personnel and subgroups. It is exceedingly difficult to separate evaluative judgments from objective measurements of organizational performance. Thus, any information provided by persons and groups is likely to become the basis for adjustments in allocating resources and rewards to them.

Furthermore, personnel may view the establishment of a more thorough feedback mechanism as another administrative tool for surveillance and control over them.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, administra-

<sup>17</sup> William R. Catton, Jr., "A Retest of the Measurability of Certain Human Values." *American Sociological Review*, XXI (June, 1956), 357-59; Likert, *op. cit.*, pp. 192-95; and Miller, *op. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Warner and Havens, *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Likert, *op. cit.*, pp. 208-209. Sometimes the existence of objective performance data can increase personnel satisfaction and improve relations with the supervisors. Consider Peter M. Blau and W. Richard Scott, *Formal Organizations: A Comparative Approach* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1962), pp. 178-79, 248.

tors may anticipate a disruption of their own traditional control over information and communication in the organization. The existence, outside of administrative circles, of objective data on organizational performance could pose management problems.

These problems suggest three general courses of action: (1) help organizational personnel understand the possibility, nature, limitations, and actual interpretations and uses of feedback measurements; (2) develop ways of separating personnel evaluation from the measurement of consequences of organizational programs;<sup>20</sup> and (3) establish a climate supportive of the existence and use of feedback data in decisions and actions throughout the organization, and not solely in the top administrative echelons.<sup>21</sup>

### *Problems of Personnel and Resources*

The technical nature of the feedback process indicates the need for specially trained individuals. The more intangible the goals and products of the group are, the more technical is the process of obtaining reliable and valid measurements, and the more important is the training of the personnel involved.

There are some practical problems. Present personnel are already fully committed to other tasks, and adding feedback as another assignment hardly maximizes the probability of getting a useful product. It is also unlikely they have had special training in the feedback process.

In addition, the development of feedback processes is a pioneering venture for which there are few guidelines. In the context of general skepticism by administrators and personnel (and perhaps a general lack of understanding), an individual would likely be subject to considerable cross-pressures and lack of support. Few persons may want to try such an endeavor under those conditions. If such persons could be found, either within the organization or from outside, many organizations (or local subunits of the large groups) could not afford them. Personnel require support, and without resources their time may be wasted. The fewer resources an organization can or will invest in this kind of measurement, the less complete, frequent, reliable, or valid the data may be.

Nevertheless, there are a number of things which could be done to improve the feedback process at all levels of the organization and in groups without substantial resources: (1) borrow and adapt methods and systems from other organizations which have already

<sup>20</sup> Haberstroh, *op. cit.*, p. 1185; and Likert, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

<sup>21</sup> Likert, *op. cit.*, pp. 206-208.

developed useful feedback mechanisms; (2) utilize feedback information and services from other units of the organization (i.e., local units could use data and help from central units); (3) occasionally use consultants from outside the organization (from public universities, Extension Services, and vocational and technical schools);<sup>22</sup> and (4) develop in-service training programs to improve personnel ability throughout the organization to help provide, interpret, and use feedback information.<sup>23</sup> This could be facilitated through the use of professional journals, organizational newsletters, special workshops, and other training sessions.

In large organizations where availability of resources permits, the feedback process could be substantially improved by establishing a special unit within the organization. Personnel in this unit or department would need expertise for the measurement job, authority, resources, and cooperation from all administrative and other personnel. With such an organizational mechanism, there would be opportunity to develop and improve workable processes for providing decision makers with information about the consequences of policies and actions of the organization and its personnel.

#### *Problems in Using Feedback*

Two problems in the use of feedback may be noted.<sup>24</sup> First, even if adequate feedback information were obtained and communicated to administrators, there would be no guarantee of its proper use in decision making. Preoccupation with some data and neglect of others, misinterpretation of data, and failure to use available information to enlighten particular decisions are among the pitfalls. Therefore, the utility of feedback mechanisms must be judged at least somewhat independently of what decision makers do with the results.

Decision makers at all levels of the organization need training and experience in use of measurement data. The more authority a person has, the more important that need is. Including such knowl-

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of some disadvantages of utilizing professional research persons, see Byrn, *op. cit.*, pp. 12, 89-90, and pp. 103-105. There are, of course, disadvantages in trying to use available personnel in most organizations, especially with their present training.

<sup>23</sup> The National Task Force on Cooperative Extension Inservice Training, *An Inservice Training Program for Cooperative Extension Personnel* (no publisher, place, or date indicated).

<sup>24</sup> See V. F. Ridgway, "Dysfunctional Consequences of Performance Measurements," in Albert H. Rubenstein and Chadwick J. Haberstroh (eds.), *Some Theories of Organization* (Homewood, Illinois: The Dorsey Press, Inc., and Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1960), pp. 371-77; and Likert, *op. cit.*, pp. 220-21.

edge and skill in the characteristics guiding personnel selection, and developing in-service training programs could help minimize this problem.

The second problem is the abuse of measurement and reporting systems.<sup>25</sup> Examples are the invasion of individual privacy, and use of information as arbitrary levers for "political" control of persons when this is outside the legitimate scope of organizational authority and procedures. Possible safeguards include: (1) training all personnel in some of the essentials of organizational design and feedback processes so that they can judge between appropriate and inappropriate uses of feedback; (2) establishing and using policies which foster checks and balances among individuals, subgroups, and administration in the feedback process; and (3) occasional independent "auditing" or measuring and reporting to all personnel, by persons outside of the organization, of the methods, uses, and consequences of the feedback process.

#### CONCLUSION

Most organizations can do much more than they have done to obtain adequate information about the consequences of organizational policies and programs of activity. Such results could then be used to adjust policies and programs in order to increase attainment of professed goals, productivity, and the maintenance and strengthening of the organization. For larger, more complex organizations, this calls for establishing a special feedback unit or department. For all organizations, large and small, it calls for training personnel in the nature and function of feedback in organized activities.

<sup>25</sup> Consider William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., Anchor Book, 1956), Part 4.

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COMMUNICATE. The reason middle managers quit is not pay or pension, but the feeling they're not part of the team or they don't know where they're going. The manager himself has to create the personal atmosphere. Any manager who doesn't have an hour a week to spend with his people to discuss what he's doing and what they're doing isn't a good manager. —FRANK X. WHITE