

Adjusting Administration to War Time

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LIKE ALL OTHER administrative organizations in the United States, private and public, the Social Security Board felt at once the repercussion of the bombs at Pearl Harbor. Many of our activities, especially those in connection with the responsibilities we then had for employment services, had already been increasing under pressures generated by the defense program. On December 7, 1941, however, it became clear that no corner of our organization would escape the impact of war.

I like to believe that the Board was better equipped than many organizations to face this emergency. It had the advantage of being a young organization, recruited in a period when public service challenged the imagination of young people and many people no longer young. From the labor market, overcrowded during most of the preceding 6 years, the Board had been able to attract and select, in accordance with merit principles, a staff who were wholeheartedly interested in the objectives of the program and had, I believe, an unusually high level of educational and technical achievement. I have been told that never before had so large an organization been recruited wholly under the civil-service system. Since social security was new in this country, however, very few among the thousands of employees eventually recruited could have specific experience in the administrative duties for which the organization became responsible under the Social Security Act. Moreover, nearly all the specific procedures for such administration had to be worked out from scratch.

For these reasons, staff training—basic training and specialized training, at induction and on the job—has been a prime concern of the Board since the beginning. A training program had been started by the spring of 1936, months before the first thousand employees were on the rolls. Because we had good people, interested in learning and in their jobs, it was both economical and just for the Board to adopt and follow a policy of promotion from within, and to advance competent

employees to more responsible jobs as new opportunities opened up in the growing organization. Thus many supervisory jobs were held by persons who know, from personal experience, the exact nature of the work their subordinates were doing. Moreover, since we all were working together, and often working against time as one provision of the act after another went into scheduled operation, there was a widespread and critical interest among the staff both in the objectives of the program and in the best ways of working to fulfill them.

As a consequence of this history, I believe I can say, without being smug, that the outbreak of the war found us with a closely knit organization and reasonably tight and smooth administrative procedures. Each year we had been able to do a little better than we had hoped and to turn back part of our appropriation for administrative expenses. More important, the crisis found us with an enthusiastic and critical working spirit on the part of the great majority of our staff. In its 6 years of existence the Social Security Board had not had time to develop the middle-aged bulges and lethargy which often unfortunately characterize organizations as well as individuals. We hope it never will develop these qualities.

We also were in a position to realize, because of our concern with the labor market and other economic situations, that the slogan "business as usual," no matter how honorable its intention, would not be feasible for any organization in war-time. The best we could hope for was "standards as usual," trusting that ingenuity and effort would enable us to do as much work as we had been doing—or more—when we had far less to work with. In the circumstances which confronted us, many changes in ways of doing business had to be made to get the essential work done.

The obstacles we have been facing for the past year and a half are too well known to nearly all public and private administrators to need more than mention. Chief among them are the loss of experienced personnel to war agencies or the armed forces and inability to get qualified persons for replacements. In one large branch of the organization, last year's turn-over was 100 percent.

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Like other agencies, the Board has also had to face actual or impending shortages of supplies and equipment and also the particularly severe shortages of office space and housing in Washington.

The measures used to combat these difficulties also are not novel in themselves. Activities have been decentralized whenever it has been possible and desirable to do so. When possible, we have simplified the work to be done, the ways of doing it, and the materials and equipment used in turning it out. We have preached and practiced training and still more training. These are familiar lines of action. I think, however, that we are using some new and effective ways to implement old devices.

Few of us failed to recognize that war would make it necessary to get along without services and conveniences which had been entirely appropriate in time of peace. The problem was how to identify the jobs, practices, and equipment which could be sacrificed, and how to make full use of those remaining. In even a few years an organization, like a ship, develops barnacles that slow up its progress. In one or another part of the organization, things continue to be done in a certain way chiefly because they have been done that way, even though the reason for doing them may have been outgrown.

At the beginning of a new program, for example, certain types of statistical material, which no one had had occasion or opportunity to collect previously, had to be gathered and tabulated for the information necessary to guide and test administration. When that information was once gained, and when experience showed little subsequent change in it from year to year, reporting could be discontinued temporarily or permanently. It may be that the Board has not yet stopped calling for all the reports which can be dispensed with, but we have the will to do so and, with the collaboration of all concerned, hope to continue progress in this direction. The problem is to identify and do away with the habits and practices which have grown up accidentally, or which, having once been useful, are no longer warranted at this time.

For material things, that job is relatively easy, especially at the beginning. As I said earlier, I believe that administration of the Social Security Board has been reasonably tight and economical judged by prevailing standards in either business or government. Yet the searches made by the

administrative officers in each of our Washington bureaus turned up, for example, 375 file cabinets which could be returned to stock for others who needed them more (incidentally releasing 2,170 square feet of floor space); 280 telephone extensions were removed, producing a small but worthwhile saving in monthly charges and making scarce instruments available for urgent needs; and 220 typewriters were transferred to more useful purposes. In some instances, the reductions in equipment and other facilities meant belt tightening—that is, deliberate lowering of standards that had been entirely legitimate before civilian scarcities became a byword. In other cases, offices found—often to their surprise—what I have called barnacles; for example, inherited file cases full of material collected by a previous incumbent of a job or for a purpose no longer valid, or telephone extensions which have been installed for some function which no longer existed.

The "Why" Survey

A much more ambitious survey, known popularly as the "why" survey, was undertaken last fall by the Bureau of Old-Age and Survivors Insurance. Because of the nature of its jobs, that Bureau's losses of personnel to the war agencies and armed forces had been particularly heavy. Its large-scale operations, moreover, required equipment and material urgently needed for war-connected activities. In announcing the survey, the Director said, "We cannot conscientiously use men and machines and materials for activities and operations not essential to the immediate needs of the program, even though such activities are desirable in times of peace. We should not so compete with war industries and war agencies."

A 6-month schedule was worked out for detailed studies, one after another, of more than 50 activities of the Bureau. All employees, from bottom to top, were urged to look critically at each stage in each of the activities under review. More than 6,575 separate suggestions, representing the ideas of more than 2,000 different employees, were made and processed through to the office of the Director of the Bureau.

Proposals developed in the course of this review of Bureau operations have ranged from major decisions by the Board, such as decisions to close or combine certain field offices, to apparently small

procedural changes. In any large-scale operation, however, what seems like a minor simplification may result in very large savings in effort and money. For example, omission of the left-hand part of one form has eliminated the biggest typing job in each of more than 400 field offices of the Board and resulted in savings of some \$218,000 in personnel and printing costs. This part of the form was originally designed to supply information for the wage records of State unemployment compensation agencies; it was found, however, that the same information can be made available to the 40 States which use it at far less cost in time, effort, and money by reproducing the data mechanically as a byproduct of the Board's accounting operations. It is important that in many of these simplifications we have in mind not only our present limitations in personnel but also the situation at the end of the war, when an enormous backlog of deferred retirement claims will probably come to us suddenly for quick action.

The cumulative value of all these tightening efforts was reflected in this year's budget estimates for the Bureau of Old-Age and Survivors Insurance, in which the Board was able to request an increase of only 1.7 percent in administrative expenses of the Bureau to meet an increase of 6.1 percent in its work load.

Job Methods Training

It has long been a practice in business organizations to call in efficiency experts to diagnose trouble spots and bottle-necks and prescribe remedies and general tonics to increase the output of organization. Obviously, the Board could not have adopted this course of action, even if it had been so minded; the Nation's specialized talent in efficiency methods and inventions was needed by many with a more urgent claim on such services. Moreover, we are of the conviction that good administration cannot be superimposed at the top or pulled out of a hat by a kind of legerdemain. It is something built up by devising and keeping open, from the bottom to the top of the organization, channels for common understanding of the problems to be met and the ways in which they are being met, and channels for learning and using, day by day, all the intelligence and ingenuity that any member of the staff can bring to those problems.

I use the word "channels" advisedly, for col-

laboration among any group of persons does not happen by accident. Unless there are definite and recognized methods for working out ideas and getting them to the persons who are in a position to do something about them, and unless those persons then take the appropriate action, there are stumbling blocks all along the way. Many good ideas and even more good intentions are likely to dry rot in "suggestion boxes" or on the desk of someone along the line who is too busy to think; or they are lost somewhere in a fog of weariness, prejudice, or mere inertia. We had to find definite ways in which we could lift ourselves by our own bootstraps—that is, could find, adopt, and use ways to do as much or more with far less.

Instead of calling in outside experts or relying on a haphazard suggestion system, we therefore undertook to train every employee in the work of his unit and in improving the methods of accomplishing it—to give every last employee the "know how." With this "know how" they are able to make sensible improvements that could not be worked out in any other way. Every employee makes at least one proposal for improvement, and between 80 and 70 percent of the proposals are practicable. A grade 2 clerk-typist in our files unit has tripled her production. A \$2,000 employee in the Bureau of Employment Security worked out a procedural simplification that will save unemployment compensation agencies and the Federal Government many thousands of dollars annually.

Briefly, this is the procedure followed. The supervisor of a unit calls his employees to what is essentially a staff meeting and explains that they are going to work out together ways of simplifying and improving the methods of doing the work. He explains further that to help them a member of the Board's Training Division is there to describe a definite way to begin. The "trainer" then takes over and presents rather dramatically what is essentially the Job Methods Training plan developed by Training Within Industry for industrial foremen. Naturally, that program has had to be adapted somewhat; the biggest change we have made has been to enlist the whole staff—top, bottom, and middle—rather than to make work simplification the job of supervisors alone.

The JMT plan calls for selecting a simple con-

crete operation and breaking it down into the various steps actually followed. This break-down shows the employee how the operation is now being carried on and gives him a field on which to turn the searchlight. He learns to ask about each detail:

- Why* is it necessary?
- What* is its purpose?
- Where* should it be done?
- When* should it be done?
- Who* should do it?
- How* is the best way?

His answers to these questions in turn lead him to see how to eliminate unnecessary details and duplication, combine and rearrange details, how to place responsibility for various phases of the work more effectively, and how otherwise to simplify ways of doing necessary work.

At the end of the first meeting, each member of the group is asked to select some part of his work or that of his unit and to use the JMT techniques to work out an improved method of doing it. At subsequent meetings, over which the supervisor presides with the technical assistance of the trainer, each member of the unit presents his proposal for simplification and improvement; it is then considered and discussed by other members of the group, who help him, if necessary, to refine his idea.

This process may seem to require a large investment of time. It does. But the returns on our investment so far are so large and so immediate that we want to invest all we can at such a rate of interest. Every employee works out at least one proposal and, thanks to the training, the proposals are usually good. In the groups that have met so far, several improvements are usually developed that are so good that any one of them will pay us back many times over for the time invested by the whole group.

We think of these more or less formal meetings, however, as only the beginning. As a matter of fact, we are thinking of this as a continuing way of operating the Board wherein every supervisor seeks the cooperation of his subordinates in finding constantly better and simpler ways of accomplishing the work of the unit.

Work Simplification Program

To this end and to provide a means for getting action on proposals, a permanent work simplifica-

tion procedure has been set up. A simple form is provided on which the employee describes the improvement which he has carefully worked out, often with the help of his supervisor. These proposals are passed up the regular supervisory line until they reach the top. Approval to adopt the proposal is given at the point in the supervisory line where authority for such action exists. We want the proposals to come all the way up, however, so that we can give recognition and credit for good ideas and as a precaution against arbitrary action by subordinate supervisors.

A question may be raised concerning the advisability of having employees submit their ideas for improvement through the regular supervisory channels. Certainly "suggestion systems" avoid supervisory channels, on the principle that supervisors won't be openminded and in many cases will penalize employees for having the effrontery to suggest change. We all are likely to resist new ideas. We dislike to have our habits disturbed. There is no reason, however, to run away from this problem. Our reason for having each supervisor and his employees meet together is largely to overcome this difficulty. By the end of five or six sessions under the guidance of the trainer, the normal resistance is pretty well washed out, and the supervisor frequently has established a new relationship with his staff. I suppose that the Social Security Board has its share of supervisors who have given employees the impression that it would be tactless or unwise to offer suggestions for changing the status quo; so far those who have shared in this program are now urging their employees to recommend improvements. For one thing, under our present set-up, it reflects upon the supervisor when employees don't suggest improvements.

As a matter of fact, the Board has discovered that the improved relationship between supervisor and employees is nearly as important as the original purpose. Some of the results and byproducts of the effort are suggested by the following comments of employees rather far down the line:

I never realized before that there could be a plan for thinking out improvements. Why there is just no end to what we can do now.

I had always thought the supervisor was supposed to do all the planning of how to do the work. Now I feel it is part of all our jobs.

The thing that meant most to me was that the

supervisor and others were interested enough in us to even ask our opinions.

I learned a lot about my own work that I didn't know before and I learned more about the other people's work. That made me see just how my job is important.

I was surprised that a supervisor would sit down and help us work out ideas and then see that we got credit for them.

Before we didn't know how we stood. Now we know something worthwhile we did is recognized and appreciated.

Always before I didn't know whether we were doing the job just as we should. We were sort of turned loose to do them the best way we could. Now we know just how to go about all our work and we know it is the best way—that we helped work out and that is officially approved.

The repercussions, however, extend all the way up. Recently one official reported that his Division was undergoing a reorganization. "And it's unlike any reorganization we ever had before," he said. "This one is from the bottom up. Everyone's in on it and is interested in making it work."

Job Instructor Training

Previously we had adapted for our use another of Training Within Industry programs—Job Instructor Training. We recognized that it makes good sense to help people learn whatever things they need to learn in order to do their work most effectively. We recognized also that this training—or whatever you care to call it—can be accomplished only through our supervisors. No one would maintain that a 10-hour course by itself can equip supervisors to be expert trainers of their subordinates. We have found JIT helpful, however, as a means of making supervisors more fully aware of their responsibilities for assuring that their employees learn, quickly and correctly, the things they need to learn. JIT has also given them some of the techniques they need, and it is part of a larger continuing effort to enable everyone in a position of supervision to become an expert trainer and developer of his subordinates.

The Board could not have escaped work simplification and other economies even if we had been so minded. Like other public agencies, we have had to get our operations under lower personnel ceilings and into smaller appropriations of funds. Our good intentions have been under the contin-

uous pressure of necessity. Without those intentions, however, and without the widespread staff understanding and concerted effort I have tried to describe, necessity might have been a destructive force. As it is, we regret, but do not resent, some of the changes required by war conditions. In many other cases, moreover, we have the satisfaction of knowing that the changes we are making now—chief among them changes in point of view and in habits of working—will continue to speed and smooth operations long after the war is over.

Within the Board's organization as a whole, there is a wide range of activities, some of which have increased as others declined. Some additional responsibilities have been delegated to the Board during the emergency. Though the Federal insurance system, like the insurance systems in the States, is confronted with many problems arising from the increased volume of wage and contributions reporting, administration within the Board has no parallel for the situation faced by State unemployment compensation agencies, in which unemployment benefit claims and payments have declined to a small fraction of those a year ago. I doubt if many groups of administrators have had to face more difficult problems than are involved in so sharp and swift a drop in major activities while, at the same time, they must stand by ready to take up, at some future unpredictable date, a sudden job of unknown but doubtless very large dimensions.

The decline in the claims load explains, of course, why costs of administering unemployment compensation programs have increased in relation to benefit payments until in some States the ratio is now very high. This situation raises a problem which is of prime concern to the Board as well as the State agencies. Granted at once that it is essential to maintain a structure which will withstand the post-war impact, what changes can and should be made now to release staff, money, equipment, and materials which are critically needed elsewhere? Obviously no one knows the whole answer to this question, and obviously the answers will differ greatly among the States and among places within a State. I doubt, however, whether any would deny that there are many answers and that these answers, individually of varying importance, are collectively of great importance, and that it is a matter of personal self-respect and our duty as public administrators

and as citizens of a warring country to find those answers and put them into effective operation.

If the Board's own experience gives a guide—and I am sufficiently impressed by it to believe that it does—the job all of us must do and keep on doing can be done only from within and by the whole organization, from bottom to top. It can be done only by enlisting the interest and brains and efforts of all the people who do the job and so know it better than anyone else. No detail is too small, and no activity too large, to be worth critical review, reappraisal, and the indicated action.

The biggest enemies we face as administrators

are inertia, a universal failing of mankind which appears among "bureaucrats" as among others, and the war weariness which comes from knowing that we are in the midst of world changes about which we can do little individually while we must continue to carry on our responsibilities and must bear eventually some unknown brunt. I take it that war weariness will not decrease of itself in the coming months. We must and can, however, keep clear of apathy and lethargy. We must let the chill wind of economy shake off our weariness and give us new zest. We must take off fat, for there is no fat on race horses.