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The Internal Structure of Administrative Authorities

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I. The Diversity and Complexity of the Internal Structure of Administrative Bodies

In matters of organisation form follows function. In the case of administrative authorities their internal composition is shaped by the variety of the tasks which are assigned to them, by the position an authority occupies within the overall system of administrative authorities (external administrative organisation) as well as by the peculiarities of the particular areas which they administer. It is, therefore, impossible to speak of *the* internal structure of administrative authorities; it is more appropriate to consider the concrete shape which particular administrative bodies display: no administrative body is

quite the same as any other. However, a number of constants, such as types of duties assigned, patterns of elements of organisation and standardised relational structures, do allow us to set up models to describe their internal structure at least in general terms.

The term "internal structure" refers initially to the administrative units permanently institutionalised within public authorities, to their functions and interrelations. This, however, only provides a partial description of administrative authorities and is therefore inadequate. It is as if we were to attempt to describe human morphology solely by explaining the function of the joints. It is more useful to interpret the term "internal structure" in a way which embraces the entire organisational structure, in other words the entirety of structural arrangements introduced to facilitate the discharge of administrative tasks. Essentially these involve:

- the duties assigned and personnel allotted to an authority as base values;
- the permanent and flexible organisational units, their composition, internal function and profile and position within the overall system;
- the structural elements within decision-making and performance processes ("business processes") resulting from stipulations on organisational structure and general bureaucratic features of the organisation;
- the structure of the internal system of management or leadership.

The following remarks focus on the more central concepts and only comment on other aspects where this appears to be warranted in order to explain the general context.

II. Approaches to Internal Organisation

1. Tasks, Personnel and Resources as Threshold Parameters

The tasks which an authority is charged with performing are largely determined by internal sectoral divisions, by the catalogue of duties assigned to each section and by the concrete function which the authority has been set up to perform; these are largely laid down for the authority to follow and are "non-negotiable".

The first step towards laying down the internal structure of an authority is, therefore, a matter of systematising the tasks assigned to it in terms of their general type, the objects of its actions and the specific nature of sub-tasks. The result of such an analysis takes the form of an organisation chart (an organigram). This chart contains all of the individual sub-tasks grouped as appropriate and arranged hierarchically. The more varied the range of tasks assigned to an authority, the more levels need to be introduced into this structure (sub-tasks, discrete tasks, task groups, task areas).

Task analysis and the classification of tasks form the basis for the creation of internal organisational units within the authority. Other factors which play a key role here are the personnel available and, on some occasions, the material resources on or around which the organisation has to be constructed. An authority is shaped just as much by the number, nature and quality of its staff as it is by the tasks assigned to it. The more people work in an authority, the more complex the authority will in general be in terms of its vertical and horizontal differentiation. The qualities and skills of individual members of staff may also have a shaping influence – in smaller authorities more than in larger ones.

2. *Internal Divisions, Distribution of Business and Some Concrete Examples*

A number of instruments are available for setting out the internal structure of administrative bodies. The approach followed moves in stages from general divisions to finer distinctions. The first stage is to develop an organigram for the organisation or administration. As a general framework this sets out the various organisational units arranged to reflect their horizontal and vertical relationships (i.e. the basic units within the organisation), as well as intermediate levels and the management level. It also includes support units such as auxiliary units and advisory committees.

A second instrument, which complements and builds on the organigram, is the business distribution plan. It is in this plan that individual tasks are assigned to the various organisational units; it also contains personnel allocations and indicates the actual functions assigned to individual members of staff (heads of organisational units, executive officers, other staff) and rules for providing cover. In the smaller and medium-sized authorities this level of formalisation is usually sufficient. In larger and more complex organisations job-distribution plans and job descriptions are employed to allow more detailed structuring. These instruments, however, become quite indispensable as soon as administrations are subjected to more rigorous cost controls or when a competitive environment is simulated by means of benchmarking. Only by using these implements is it possible to establish cost centres and reference units with a satisfactory degree of accuracy.

III. The Standard Configuration (One-Dimensional Organisation)

The number and the diversity of the parameters of organisational structure do not – as might be expected – lead to the internal structure of administrative organisations being impenetrable. Both the building bricks and the principles on which these organisations are constructed are limited in number and in type. Despite the variety of the modifications which may be introduced in the final stages of construction, it is possible – just as with buildings, which are similarly all derived from basic types – to identify archetypes of internal organisation. Here too we find standard configurations and individual embellishments, typical organisational units and special variants.

By standard configuration we mean the most commonly found structural pattern. This is in principle simple and practicable with an almost natural elegance. It is a system which contains just a small number of different elements arranged in an easily comprehensible pattern of interrelations. This pattern is applicable to small and to large organisations and lends itself well to later additions and modifications.

1. *Basic Units*

The basic unit of organisation is not – as might easily be thought – the individual member of staff, or the corresponding organisational abstraction, "the post" or "position", but rather a functional unit (a module), which typically comprises a number of members of staff or posts. As a matter of general principle, the tasks assigned to an authority are to be distributed seamlessly across this suite of equal-ranking functional

units. The names given to these basic units vary considerably and the terminology is not applied consistently. In local authorities they are frequently designated as "offices" (*Ämter*), or on occasions as "sectoral units" (*Sachgebiete*), "sections" (*Referate*) or "departments" (*Dezernate*). However, since these terms have not been officially defined, the way in which they are applied varies. The terms "*Amt*" and "*Dezernat*" are in some places used to refer to groups of these organisational units. Similarly, "*Sachgebiet*" and "*Referat*" may be employed in the sense of sub-divisions within these units.

There are a number of criteria for determining the number and the size of these basic units and for the allocation of tasks across them. It is in most cases left to the discretion of the authority concerned to apply them appropriately. One principle is that of the so-called "organisational minimum". According to this principle, the number of basic units should be kept as small as possible, the corollary being that the number of members of staff assigned to each unit should be as large as possible. The extent to which this is possible depends on the types of functions which the authority is required to perform, the scope for internal differentiation and on the qualities of the actual staff available. In the final analysis, the most critical factor is the "span of control" which the head of an internal unit can be expected to handle. In the case of routine duties, where decisions of the same type have to be taken frequently and following the same procedure, a head of department will be able to be responsible for overseeing far more staff than in a situation where the tasks themselves are inherently more complex. As far as the modality for distributing tasks across the various basic units is concerned, normally two factors are of especial importance. Firstly, it is important to distinguish central tasks (personnel, budgets, organisation, central services, public relations) from sectoral tasks, which, secondly, have to classified according to type. This classification is governed by the principle of relatedness. In most cases it is expedient to group tasks of the same or of a similar nature.

The personnel in these basic units can typically be assigned to three functional classes, each requiring very different qualifications. Tasks are assigned as a matter of principle to executive officers (*Sachbearbeiter*) who are responsible for discharging them. Executive officers draw on the assistance of support staff (*Mitarbeiter*). Every organisational unit is headed by a chief officer (variously called head of section, head of department), who is responsible not only for the day-to-day running of the unit, but also for taking on personally the more complex cases assigned to the unit, as well as for representing the unit externally. The manner in which the various players interact and co-operate is subject to considerable diversity. Many arrangements are possible ranging from hierarchical structures at one extreme to team work at the other; hierarchical structures do, however, tend to predominate.

2. *Levels of Command and Leadership Positions*

The basic units, which are all located on the same level in the hierarchy and which are also usually the authority's point of contact with the outside world, need to be co-ordinated and led. Depending on the size of the authority in question, this supervision is provided by at least one, and frequently several, levels of leadership. Smaller authorities, such as the administrations of municipalities associated with a county, normally

display only two levels of organisation (sectoral departments and the mayor's or town clerk's office), whilst larger authorities, such as ministries, may easily have up to six internal levels of command (sections, sub-departments, departments, main departments, chief executive, minister). Three-tier organisation can be taken as the standard configuration (basic organisational units, departments, head of authority). Intermediate levels play a dual role: they co-ordinate the work of subordinated units, and they relieve the head of the authority of certain leadership or internal management functions.

The vertical arrangement – with basic units at the bottom and tiers of "middle management" – does not necessarily imply that there is a strict separation between leadership functions and executive functions. Even the head of an authority is usually called upon to perform a number of specific executive functions, or at least is entitled to have their execution referred to him where this may be warranted. At the intermediate level leadership functions and executive functions occur in roughly equal proportion. Within the basic units there is a lower level of leadership in the form of the head of unit. However, in tendency the balance of leadership and executive functions does differ between the various levels.

The various levels are linked hierarchically within a fixed and formalised structure. Only in very special cases – requiring statutory regulation – do we find organisational units within an authority whose activities are not governed by instructions from a superordinate level. The hierarchical arrangement also has a major influence on the formal channels of communication, although process organisation within decision-making procedures does allow various forms of lateral contact.

Positions of leadership at superordinate levels are similarly classified as internal organisation units. Within state administration (federal and *Land*) they usually follow a very simple pattern with each leadership function performed by one individual. The rule is the "monocratic structure"; collegiate structures, where a number of people share one leadership function, are very much the exception. Collegiate structures are more usually found – especially at the top – in indirect state administration, i.e. within the administrative bodies of legally independent institutions, corporations and foundations. It is important to underline the fundamental distinction between appointing one or more people to occupy one leadership role (as one single organ), and the distribution of leadership functions at the top level of an organisation over a number of peer organs (the "multiple organ" approach), which in turn may exhibit either a monocratic or collegiate command structure. This is certainly not the rule, but equally it is by no means rare. Local-authority administrations provide some very good examples of this type of organisational structure with both collegiate assemblies with administrative functions (councils) as well as monocratic organs (mayors, chief executives), both of which then in most cases exercise hierarchical powers over subordinated levels of administration. But even this is by no means uniform practice, as is evidenced by the "*Magistrat*" (collegiate executive) system which is found in some *Länder*. The collegiate structures which exist within indirect state administration predominantly embody those organs which are intended to represent the members of the organisation.

3. *Model Structure*

The standard configuration of internal administrative organisation can be characterised as follows:

- Authorities typically exhibit a pyramid structure with three tiers of organisation. Within the hierarchy the executive level (basic units) is located beneath an intermediate and a higher level of command. At the top of the pyramid there is usually just one leadership organ. At the intermediate level there are a number of peer positions of leadership. In the state sector leadership positions are usually of a monocratic nature; within indirect state administration they are also quite frequently organised on collegiate lines.
- Horizontal divisions at subordinate levels are usually made in accordance with the need to distinguish between central and sectoral tasks; within each section tasks of a similar nature are grouped together. This results in a divisional structure.
- As a general rule executive tasks are assigned to the basic units and only in those cases for which explicit provision has been made to the superior levels. The hierarchical structure does, however, allow for intervention from above.
- Basic units usually consist of a group of people. The functions performed within these groups are usually highly specialised (division of tasks and functions).
- The organisational units located at the same level in the hierarchy are equal in status. Relationships between the levels are determined by the fixed hierarchical structure within which they exist, and which is a "one-line system". Within the basic organisational units there are also some examples of hierarchical structures.

IV. Matrix Organisation (Two-Dimensional Organisation)

The term "matrix organisation" is used to designate a multi-line organisation in which the organisational units, usually the basic units, are subject to instructions from two sources. An organisational unit is thus embedded within a complex of sub- and super-ordination, which in contentive terms may in some cases display a certain degree of overlapping. The term "matrix" is derived from the convention of depicting organisational structure in the form of an organigram. More usually a matrix is a schematic, two-dimensional arrangement of various elements using lines and columns.

Distinct matrix forms of organisation are not particularly common in administrative authorities. They tend to occur, for example, in cases where divisions into departments are made on spatial or territorial grounds (e.g. where a department is responsible for a territorial entity such as a county). Sectoral tasks of the same kinds occur in all of these territorial entities. In order to be able to co-ordinate particular sectoral aspects in the various departments it is usual to set up laterally organised units with rights of intervention. In fact it is more usual to find matrix organisation of this type in state institutions (e.g. research institutions) than within authorities.

Individual elements of the matrix structure, on the other hand, are quite common within organisational structures. Every authority which separates central and sectoral tasks and assigns the former to dedicated organisational units does in fact contain (and apply) a concealed matrix. Central tasks are largely concerned with "the administration

of administration". The influence which central units are entitled to exert on organisational structures, as well as the provision of personnel and financial resources, can have a major impact on the ability of the sectoral units to discharge the tasks assigned to them. The greater the influence formally vested in the central units vis-à-vis the sectoral units, the more clearly defined is the matrix structure. Matrix structures may also be employed when project officers or project groups are given powers over – what in other circumstances would be – peer units within the context of project organisation. Appointments of other officers with special functions (e.g. equal opportunities officers, safety officers) may entail matrix structures depending on the particular function concerned.

V. Support Units and Advisory Boards

1. General and Personal Support

Executive and leadership functions both require a variety of types of support to be performed satisfactorily. One form of support is provided by "central services" (e.g. postal service, typing pools, in-house printshops, transport services, records offices, purchasing) which are available to everyone working within the authority, and which in most cases are combined within one cross-sectional unit and thus figure in the line structure (organigram). Leadership posts, however, often require support services to relieve them of some of their duties. Such support usually takes the concrete form of providing dedicated support staff (a secretary, a personal assistant), or it may be dispersed over a number of individuals and institutionalised in the form of a secretariat (e.g. ministerial secretariat, presidential secretariat). The primary purpose of such units is to provide assistance with the day-to-day running of the administrative body (secretarial work, personally addressed correspondence, running the appointments diary, screening written texts and drafts). The larger and the more important the authority, the more widespread such support units appears to be.

2. Task Forces

Providing support, where required, to the heads of the sectoral units can also be seen as one part of the leadership function, especially in the case of more complex matters where, for example, a decision has to be taken on a fundamental issue which may set a precedent, or where administrative planning is involved. In situations of this type it may be appropriate to establish task forces to support the head of the unit by taking on the preparatory groundwork and giving informed advice.

Task forces report to leadership posts and have no direct powers to issue directions to other organisational units in the line. They are, however, closely associated with these units by dint of the nature of their work, since the tasks assigned to an authority – including both fundamental and forward-planning components – are located at the basic units and with middle management. This dichotomy is an inevitable consequence of the separation of leadership and executive functions, as the leadership function is not simply a matter of personnel management, but also implies the specialist competence

required to oversee the technicalities of the work of the sectoral unit. Task forces are often regarded by those working within line-units as rivals, or even as a convenient place to unload some of their own work. It would be more correct to regard such task forces – where their function is clearly defined and they are well run – as being a useful addition for all who are involved in the performance of a sectoral task in those special situations in which it is necessary to grapple with quite complex issues in anticipation of future developments. Task forces do, however, exert a dysfunctional effect when co-operation and co-ordination with the line ceases to function and when, as a result of their proximity to decision-makers at the top, they attempt to frame and implement their own policies for administration to follow.

3. *Advisory Boards*

An additional form of support for the decision-making process is provided in the form of institutionalised advisory boards. Advisory boards exist at all levels of administration, but are especially numerous in the ministries, and particularly so in the federal ministries. As the name suggests, the function of these boards is to give advice – and advice, moreover, which is drawn from outside the authority. Advisory boards are not set up to cover the entire spectrum of tasks assigned to an authority, but rather to assist with specific areas. They are attached to the top level of leadership and frequently to the head of the authority directly. The function of advisory boards is to supply expert advice on specific issues from sources outside the authority, and particularly from the scientific and academic community. In fact they frequently also function as a formal channel to provide interest groups and other associations with access to political decision-makers.

4. *The Proliferation of Command Structures*

Personal support units, task forces and advisory boards provide an effective means of supplementing the standard configuration as long as their remit is limited to a specific function and it is not forgotten that the line organisation should be prepared and able to perform all aspects of all of the tasks allocated to the authority.

However, it is by no means a simple task to organise the internal structure of an authority in such a way that it can meet this requirement. The larger the authority, the harder this task becomes. The steadiness (or rigidity) and circumspection, the stability of attitudes and patterns of behaviour and the lengthy decision-making procedures in bureaucratic institutions have often led to the political masters of larger authorities – who come to these public authorities from very different backgrounds and see themselves as being subject to a quite different set of expectations – being less than satisfied with the manner in which the authority is run. In order to prevent themselves from being exposed to the shortcomings – genuine or perceived – of the administrative machinery, they tend to arrange their immediate working environment in a rather different way employing "personal assistants" – who are frequently recruited from outside the administration – and creating a set of policy tools which they consider to be more conducive to swift decision-making and action. In recent years this has led to a

very significant degree of restructuring. Staffing levels in the secretariats of ministers and state secretaries have risen sharply; at the same time political functions, which traditionally had been well taken care of within the organisational units of a line, have frequently been redirected up to the leadership level, where they have been brought together in hierarchically structured command units. Their function is then no longer limited to one of preparing decisions. Even when they are not given any formal rights to give directions to subordinate organisational levels, they have in many cases informally appropriated such hierarchical rights. The proliferation of positions of political leadership (state ministers, political state secretaries) is making the matter all the more complex. At the ministerial level more than anywhere else, a political and organisational "overlay" has developed which, for a variety of reasons, is creating increasing dysfunctionality.

VI. Non-Hierarchical Structural Elements

State administration in a democratically constituted state must by legal necessity be organised in a hierarchical fashion as only this form of organisation is conducive to the proper functioning of the parliamentary principle, i.e. the accountability of a government or of a minister before parliament. When a minister is not able to shape policy within his portfolio he cannot be held responsible for it. Hierarchy should not, therefore, be seen *per se* as something negative, but rather as a functional necessity. Most people feel quite subjectively that hierarchical structures allow them to find their way around more easily as they reduce complexity and provide stability and transparency.

The day-to-day life of an administrative body is in fact characterised only to a very minor degree by what are felt to be oppressive manifestations of hierarchical structures as the working practices of an authority are only partly determined by formal structures. Process organisation and the accompanying informal constellation of relationships (informal networks) play a relatively important role. With regard to process organisation, the usual practice is for responsibility for action – and also the authority to take decisions – to be located principally with the basic units. Decisions are taken at higher levels usually only in exceptional cases, such as in those cases where a fundamental decision of principle is required (strategic or operational decisions of a fundamental nature), or on issues of special (particularly political) significance. Where the need to obtain information or the need to take account of external competences means that a decision touches on the interests of a number of different organisational units within an administrative authority, or indeed of other authorities, these bodies must be involved in the interests of co-ordination; in such cases leadership levels are not usually involved, or only to a limited extent. These procedural elements, which usually take the form of participation and power-sharing structures, are supported by appointing teams where this appears expedient. These may be dedicated to specific procedures or issues for which working groups are then formed. Horizontal collegiate structures (e.g. conferences of heads of department in authorities with varied functions or established forms of inter-departmental contact) and vertical sectoral meetings (e.g. sectoral committees) are part of the common organisational practice of well-run authorities. Despite the differences between the various areas of administration (e.g. between the

police and "umbrella" authorities), it can be noted that all administrative authorities, although hierarchically organised, tend to adopt approaches based on support and co-operation, even spanning different levels in the hierarchy.

VII. Project Management

1. The Normal Configuration vs. Project Management

In the periodically recurring discussions on administrative reform, and indeed in the current round of discussion, the recommendation is usually heard to the effect that the prevailing internal structure should – depending on the particular stance taken – be replaced, supplemented or overlain with a form of "project management".

Administrations "produce" both decisions and tangible actions. The term "project" is usually employed to describe schemes or undertakings of limited duration which display an unusual degree of complexity. Setting up projects may be warranted by a number of circumstances, such as the scope of the issue in question being particularly difficult to estimate, the need to perform a large number of related actions and sub-tasks, the high number of (internal and external) parties involved, the use of new channels and techniques for problem-solving, the difficulty of assessing the risks associated with realisation or the existence of unusually difficult conditions affecting implementation.

Projects, within this understanding of the term, represent an exception to the day-to-day work of an administration. The rule tends to be constituted by relatively uniform or similar tasks of a low or medium level of complexity, which are performed according to established standards. Routine work does not require special structural arrangements to cope with exceptions. Moreover, with its relatively simple and open organisational structures public administration is by nature equipped to cope with decisions and schemes as complex as those referred to above. However, like all large organisations, public administrations do harbour a number of weak spots which need to be eradicated. There is today general agreement on the desirability of achieving more economic deployment of resources, of speeding up procedures, of improving the quality of outcomes, or, in other words, of achieving significantly greater efficiency. This applies to routine procedures and to projects alike – perhaps even more so to the latter.

"Project management" is a highly suitable strategy to adopt specifically to target these issues and to achieve an overall increase in efficiency. It is brought to bear both on the planning and supervision and on the implementation of decision-making and performance processes. Planning, in this context, refers to the stage of organising and scheduling project implementation with regard to

- the aim of the project (the outcome),
- the institutional framework (project organisation),
- procedure (implementation schedule, time-scale) and
- resources (personnel, material and financial resources).

Supervision accompanies project implementation. Throughout implementation it compares targets and planned outcomes with actual or current states and intervenes to adjust schedules accordingly where major discrepancies occur. Implementation is the executive action undertaken within the framework of the programme adopted.

Project management, in the current sense of the term, may – but need not necessarily – affect the internal structure of an authority. It may operate alongside the normal configuration in those cases where a concrete project does not call for any organisational modifications. Where such changes are either necessary or advisable, i.e. where a special form of project organisation is required, then it does indeed superimpose itself on the prevailing internal organisational structure.

2. *Project Organisation*

Project organisation may affect the command system, organisational structure and process organisation, or just one of these elements. The situation can best be described as a continuum of design options, which in turn display a number of significant stages or patterns.

a) Project Control

The implementation of projects is first and foremost the responsibility of the basic units, to which all responsibilities for task performance are assigned as a matter of course. More significant tasks, however, do as a rule require guidance from above. Senior staff have to take on responsibility for complex decision-making and performance processes by exercising a technical control function, or at least by supervising progress and implementation. The exercise of these functions may be facilitated in a variety of ways. For example, senior staff may have direct planning and supervisory duties mandatorily assigned to them; in the case of projects of some special relevance, these functions may be appropriated by the higher echelons of leadership. Last but not least, at those authorities in which a large number of projects are carried out (e.g. in ministries or intermediate regional authorities), a superposed system for project control might be introduced. All of these design variants involve some degree of remodelling of the leadership system in the form of constraints being placed on the usually prevailing elasticity in the exercise of leadership functions.

b) Project Officers

Project management may also harbour a further component affecting organisational structure where it involves leaving unchanged the competences of those organisational units which would otherwise bear responsibility – or would at least have to be involved – whilst at the same time deploying people in special roles as project officers or project managers to take charge of the process. This can happen in two ways. On the one hand, it may involve the appointment of project advisors to provide specialist input to the administrative department in question and to play an intermediary role (project management by influence); alternatively, project officers may be granted powers to give directions to line units (matrix project management). Project officers of this kind may be either individuals or project teams.

At those authorities where a large number of projects are carried out, such as intermediate regional authorities (e.g. the districts of regional commissioners), it is becoming increasingly common practice not simply to appoint project management in one form or other on an ad hoc basis, but rather to set up an organisational unit which is permanently available to discharge these tasks and which has at its disposal the specific management skills required (e.g. project task-forces).

c) Project Organisation in its Pure Form

The most far-reaching design alternative to organisational structure is "pure project organisation". In this variant the project is assigned to a dedicated organisational unit which has been created specifically for this purpose. Tasks are withdrawn from the line and allocated to task forces, which in turn may display a wide array of design features ranging from one-man operations to project groups with auxiliary steering and support groups. These groups may be hierarchically structured or may operate as teams. In special cases they may even include the participation of staff from other authorities. There is a long tradition of special organisational forms of these kinds being set up to cope with special contingencies, such as catastrophes.

Project organisation is then possible in a variety of forms as an institutional modification to the more usual organisational structure. The various forms are coming to be employed increasingly frequently. However, since organisational forms need to demonstrate both stability and transparency, some restraint is called for in the deployment of these instruments.

If changes to organisational structure are deemed to be unavoidable, it is prudent to limit them to what is necessary. The use of activity-orientated components drawn from project management (systematic planning of objectives, procedures and time) and improvements to the leadership system are in most cases sufficient, and in administrative practice are indeed the prime focus of attention.

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