Getting Along with Administrators

HAL R. TAYLOR

PERHAPS A BETTER TITLE for this article might be, "Mistakes We've Made With Administrators." Another approach might read, "How Administrators Have Failed to Communicate."

Actually, I'm not intending to place blame anywhere or even imply that we have a problem. But considering changing times, tightening budgets, heavier demands, and pressures in general, I think its time we paused for some reflection. Communication between two people nearly always first requires some understanding, and perhaps we need to take a look at each other.

We information types often appear as if the world evolves about us and only us. Sure, it does! But the same goes for administrators. They've got financial, policy, personnel, political problems that we seldom face. Considering the contacts we have, the skills we have (or should have), and the impossible tasks administrators must handle certainly the two of us should work so closely together that we think almost as one.

Where have we gone wrong? Or have we?

You know and I know almost any time we have been successful in explaining programs . . . in doing a "good" information job . . . we've done it by improving the quality of our information techniques . . . our timing of releases, our writing and production of our publications, our films, our radio tapes, etc. Frequently, almost as soon as we release an information product that is good enough to command attention and do the job it was intended to do someone yells "competition." Or, we get chastized because the job cost so much. Yes, things are tough all over.

Then we continually demand, dream, wish, and cry over the idea that information hasn't been fully and completely considered as one of the major policy matters by our organizations. If we have some ideas that might help, chances are we keep them to ourselves. At least many administrators have told me that they avoid discussing the subject with us because they're waiting for us to come up with some suggestions. Could it be, friendly folk, that we have become overly critical of how things ought to be?

Probably the information team is the most important group

any administrator has to help him establish change, and change is what our world is all about, I'd venture. We may not choose programs or set policy. And on most activities, obviously we won't always be the only ones involved. We may not even be skillful enough to handle the full array of techniques necessary. But the information team must set the pace, lead the way, if changes really are to be made.

Well, we say, that's fine. That's what I've been trying to tell everybody, but they won't tell me what they want done.

Did anyone ever ask you who tells a leader what to do? Chances are the leader type is just as anxious as anyone for some sort of direction on how to act. He differs from the rest of us, though, because he doesn't wait for that overt direction. He does **something.** He moves from a position of authority (which the rest of us are waiting for) to a position of doing. And what he does is important to communication, because people receive many messages from our actions as well as from what we say or write. Chances are that guy is appreciated by his administrator.

The leader gets direction, of course. But he gets it by tuning his antennae to events and activities around him. You might call him in a constant state of learning. He's filled with the journalist's intense curiosity; he's aware of and interested in what's going on if only because he's part educator who wants someday to explain things to someone. He fails to become hung up on language, or the jargon of any particular group or profession, including his own.

The leader also keeps in touch with his own leader. That doesn't mean he pesters the boss. The boss is already bothered by his own world, and probably he already knows about some of the things you'd have to talk over with him.

But we can learn a great deal on our own of what the boss thinks and is doing. We must, if we are to interpret policy. Sometimes all we have to do is read. Most administrators issue directives or newsletters; in the Department of Agriculture we have a mountain of material that ranges from reports of Senate and House hearings and copies of speeches to proceedings of meetings, and budget messages. Those items might even be of use to state information people who are trying to find out what their administrators are going to have to hassel with next.

Once I had an information boss who was asked if he read everything that crossed his desk. He said, "No, but I sure **look**

at everything." That's keeping in touch. Of course, he had three other valuable characteristics: Drive, fast reading skills, and the memory of an elephant.

We've talked at AAACE meetings time and time again about being innovative. Probably no other activity gains so much attention in our society these days as being innovative. Just being innovative in itself creates an aura of doing, of interest, of being dynamic. Possibly when we information people innovate, we have a tendency first to observe the route involved. Maybe that keeps us from distinguishing between means and ends. If we'll look more broadly at outcomes rather than routines, maybe we'll become more broadminded—see the big picture better. Maybe then we'll see some of the directions we need to go and thereby improve our judgment. Then maybe eventually someone will ask our help or we can offer a meaningful contribution to the program needs our organizations face and offer an information policy that could be a real part of the overall instead of the adjunct it often becomes.

Now let's look at that poor, harassed administrator. It's interesting how every so often various graduate students have discussed the "role perceptions" different individuals have of each other in an organization. Most of us tend to see others much, much differently than they see themselves. Too few attempts have been made to develop any plans to correct those ideas or to pull views into closer focus.

A rather simple way of looking at the differences in roles appears in the chart below:

ORGANIZATIONAL HIERARCHY	TIME DEVOTED TO PROBLEMS
Board or Cabinet	
University President or Secretary	
Dean or Assistant Secretaries	Planning what to do
Assistant Deans, etc.	determining ways and means
Directors	Planning how to do it
Assistant Directors	work necessary
Department Heads or Agency Heads	Program action or work to carry out the activity
Section or Division Chiefs	
Faculty or Staff	

In other words, the higher the position a person holds in an organization's hierarchy, the more time he spends on planning—on policy—and the less time he spends on a work action that will get policy into effect. We all spend about the same amount of time on figuring out how to do a job—though our jobs vary, task to task.

Planning May Bring Conflict

It may be that that how-to-do-it planning, by its very nature, brings risks of confusion and frustration. As we tackle a job together, perhaps we become confused over where specifics and generalities begin and end, because of our individual variations in training and skills relating to how a job should be done. In other words, conflict may be inevitable at this stage.

For instance, if an administrator and an editor sit down together to plan how to do it, the administrator may know of circumstances about which the editor knows nothing. Also the administrator may not wish to reveal what he knows—or he cannot. The administrator may believe, from what he knows, that a publication should be the means necessary to solve the problem. On the other hand the editor may believe, from his own experience, that a series of press releases, radio tapes, and other methods will be more effective. He may have had a long series of queries for different types of approaches; his very training suggests a completely different approach. In explaining, or trying to explain, their differing points of view, each takes time. Perhaps they become unclear, too detailed. The danger arises that each loses his audience, his point, and perhaps even his individual and professional credibility.

Obviously the answer lies somewhere between a willingness by each party to allow much give and take and to maintain a respect for one another's professional abilities. Depending upon purpose, budgets, timeliness, and priority any decision to be made may have to be the administrator's prerogative. But I think administrators certainly want and expect to get honest, objective discussion, even disagreements when necessary, for they are the ones who must first answer for their decisions. We may be next in line after they take the heat.

Now it goes almost without saying or without the implications I've already given that information people should understand

and be helpful to administrators. But there also are some pointers administrators might remember if they really expect to get the fullest support and usefulness from their information team.

First and foremost, administrators need to realize that information cannot work miracles. A different impetus to information cannot always solve "image" problems without some basic changes in programs too. To be true, program changes are taking place and information people may need to do some homework in order to explain the changes that have taken place already. But no matter how we report a program, many people will not believe it if they disagree with its concept. The more emotional or controversial a program, the more the entire effort must be changed—not just the information thrust alone.

Second, administrators should more directly keep information people better informed of programs and policy. Even though there are many ways for us to learn of those things, nothing substitutes for frequent face-to-face encounters with full opportunity to ask and answer questions. An administrator on any level should help his staff learn—everything. He keeps in touch with his own boss, in some manner, and if he relays what he has learned on to his own staff then his chances for having a zippy staff will improve tremendously.

Vertical Communication Essential

Often we all assume that most internal problems require better horizontal communication. That's partly correct, but here, I'm referring strictly to vertical communication, up and down the heirarchy, not just across organization lines. All successful organizations and the people in them practice communication both up and down the hierarchy; neither direction alone can get the job done completely.

Too often we also assume that simply because we have an organization chart, communication succeeds. Woe be to the administrator who assumes that his orders to an assistant will reach all levels of the heirarchy with the same degree of understanding the assistant received.

Third, since when do we have to have secrets? Admittedly there are always some touchy issues on personnel, program policies, and budget decisions that have a time and place for broad discussion. Public announcements may never be appropriate or

necessary. But gossip will out. The administrator who talks freely with his staff about problems and decisions will build loyalty, an understanding of the organization's purpose, and a philosophy based on truthfulness and honesty. This approach is merely putting point #2 to work. When staff members see the dilemma, they feel a part of the group. If they are urged to understand problems and to offer suggestions for solutions, who knows, they might have an answer. After all, they work for the outfit too and want to be a full member of it. Somewhere we've all failed to remember that being wanted is a basic psychological need among all humans.

Facts Fight Credibility Gap

And finally, I wish administrators would face up to the credibility gaps that undermine the effective and worthwhile programs our organizations have. They know the charges—facts contradict statements, or seem to, because of unclear or muddied information, wrong information, fragmentary information, poor timing, and even doctored information. Once a credibility gap exists—or starts to exist—then we'll see negative attitudes among our sources of information. We'll have people who issue background grudgingly, if at all. They'll clam up on controversial issues or provide the facts only under pressure. They'll substitute personalities for facts and show a distaste for the press, all correspondents, even information people like us. Or they'll provide subject matter with bitterness as if someone is meddling and avoid what the press wants and provide what the press doesn't want. Next comes what might be politely termed the "snow machine" . . . the issuance of an avalanche of materials, the churning out of PR materials on subjects of doubtful value. The public becomes innundated with information that claims everything is rosy and no one is pleased—or is he (?)—but the boss.

Surely no administrator wants that kind of information program. Surely he prefers honestly, helpfulness, and candidness. That's what the public and the mass media want. So maybe the best way of getting along with any administrator would be to help him provide an atmosphere of sincerity and reliability before someone tells him his outfit has passed its usefulness. Better yet, maybe we'd better simply get to work. I'll bet 5 to 1 that's the way my administrator would want it. How about yours?