

Chapter 17. The Molly
Bee Syndrome



All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories

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Special Edition Serial Release
for IDRA's 50th Anniversary

Chapter 17: The Molly Bee Syndrome

Few words in the English language have gone through a history of total depreciation as the word “bureaucracy.” Originally, bureaucracy formed the basis for the science of administration. Its early use was in reference to organization and grouping of administrative tasks by specialization of functions.

Excesses in organization led to the deterioration of the concept so that today the word “bureaucracy” is associated with slavish adherence to fixed rules, officialism, red tape and proliferation of organizational positions.

In my involvement as an advocate for school finance reform, I am frequently asked if school systems employ an excessive number of support staff. I served as a school principal in a low wealth district before the advent of federal programs and extensive state equalization aid. The school had 1,200 students, 40 teachers and one administrator. Aside from janitors and cafeteria workers, there was not a single person besides the principal who did not have a full-time teaching load. I didn’t even have a secretary, or assistant, or librarian or anything else, although a nurse did visit the campus one day a week. Needless to say, the number of clerks, paraprofessionals, resource personnel, counselors, administrative assistants, etc., will always seem large to me. Although I am appreciative of their roles, it seems that there is a relationship between an increased size of support staff and an increased level of bureaucracy in a system.

The following story provides some insights into the growth of a bureaucracy within an organization.

“Molly Bee needs help!” The tone of voice, as well as the curtness of the statement indicated an unmistakable desire to bring closure to the issue.

Molly Bee was the person responsible for providing duplication services for the organization. Although the Xerox 9100 required some amount of training for operation, the duplication operator position was not considered a very technical, difficult nor high-level position in a research and development organization where all of the employees had at least two college degrees and most had doctorates in specialized fields.

“Are we still providing same-day duplication services?” I asked the assistant director for administration.

“Yes, we are.”

“Is Molly Bee having to come in early or leave late?”

“No, she isn’t.”

“Is she still taking a noon lunch break and a rest break in the mornings and afternoons?”

“Yes, she is.”

“Then, why does she need help? I haven’t heard any complaints about duplicating services.”

I had not heard about any problems in duplication, although I am a poor sample when it comes to services. I know that I can ask my secretary for five copies of a letter and get them within five minutes. But this doesn’t mean that someone at the low end of the organizational totem pole isn’t waiting all day to get something copied.

“She just has too much to do,” he responded. “As we keep expanding program activity the amount of duplication keeps increasing. We have to get her some help.”

“What kind of help does she need?”

“Well, she needs an assistant. I have contacted a young lady that is willing to work for minimum wage. I suggest we hire her and assign her to Molly Bee as an assistant. She really needs her during peak workloads.”

“You know that only one person can run the Xerox machine at any one time.”

“We can stagger office hours.”

The assistant was determined to get my approval. “We have a clerical position we aren’t using. Why don’t you let me hire Laura as a temporary, that’s the name of the applicant, and let her help Molly Bee in the duplicating room? If it doesn’t work out, we can release her before the end of her probationary period.”

As executive director of the organization, I had tried for years to keep support service and administrative costs at a minimum and focus resources on program activity, but the determination and resolution evident in the assistant’s face made me wonder if perhaps we really needed more help.

The decision was probably moot anyway. The decision was made when some program director decided six months previously on the need for additional clerical staff and wrote it into a proposal. Once the proposal was funded, the law of the vacuum insisted that the position be

filled whether needed or not. Anyway, it was evident that he had already promised Molly Bee some help, and I had to allow him some discretion in the performance of his duties.

“Okay. Hire the new assistant, and we’ll see how it works out.”

I didn’t even get to meet Laura before I left for Washington where a series of meetings kept me for slightly more than a week. When I returned, I immediately faced a procession of program directors wanting to talk to me about support services.

“You have to do something about duplication. I can’t be expected to meet deadlines for the new materials if I can’t get anything duplicated around here.” Similar complaints surfaced from training, technical assistance, research and evaluation program directors.

“Didn’t the assistant hire the new duplication helper?”

“He sure did.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“I think you’d better go see.”

Very perplexed, I hastened to the duplicating room where I met a young girl running the Xerox machine.

“Hi, I’m the boss man. Are you Laura?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve heard of you.”

“How long have you been working with us?”

“Seven days.”

“Are you doing a lot of duplication?”

“Yes, sir. I do all the duplication. I sure have learned a lot, and I really like it.”

“Where’s Molly Bee?”

“She is in her office, but you can’t go in without an appointment.”

She had pointed to the door to the small inner office in the duplicating room that we had used for the storage of paper stock. On the closed door was a fairly large sign that I hadn't noticed before:

MRS. MOLLY BEE, DIRECTOR
Duplication Services Division
Knock Before Entering

Not knowing what I would find on the other side of the door, I knocked timidly before entering the room. There was Molly Bee sitting at a desk bigger than my own with a sign similar to the one at the door that provided me with her old name and the new job title. Behind her was a credenza with a series of bins containing lots of paperwork.

"Hi, Molly Bee."

"Oh, hi, Doc. How was Washington? It took me several days, but I finally got our duplicating services all straightened out."

"How did you straighten them out?"

"Well, I started by creating a new system from scratch. We never had a duplication system before."

"What does this duplication system look like?" I was afraid to ask.

Molly Bee pulled out a notebook from her king sized desk. She opened it to a page entitled, "Duplication Services Division, Administrative Memorandum No. 2, Duplication Request Form."

Administrative Memorandum No. 2 dealt with the procedure to be followed in requesting copies of a "document." A form was provided in which an employee wanting copies could check off the number of copies being requested, the size and shape of the copies, the date and time the request was initiated, the date and time it was needed, and the date and time it was completed. The form included a job order as well as space for four different signatures denoting approval of the job order by personnel from the entire organization. The Duplication Request Form was then stamped with one of four rubber stamps on the director's desk; which included a huge "approved" stamp with space for the director's signature. The other stamps were "not approved" with a space for the reason, "job priority assignment," and "resubmit."

Being completely enthralled by Administrative Memorandum No. 2, I backed up to look at Administrative Memorandum No. 1. It dealt with the creation of the Duplication Services Division staffed by Molly Bee, director, and Laura as chief duplicator.

Administrative Memorandum No. 3 provided rules for the preparation of documents for duplication. For example, all staples were to be removed prior to paper clipping the pages together, no creases or folds were allowed. Requests not in compliance would be stamped “resubmit” and returned to the “originator.”

Administrative Memorandum No. 4 dealt with timelines. “Documents needed by Thursday must be submitted by 4:00 p.m. on Monday” and same-day duplication required special justification and approval.

Administrative Memorandum No. 5 required all employees to adhere to the regulations promulgated by previous memoranda.

“Does Laura do all the duplication?” I asked.

“She has to. I am booked solid just keeping track of all the requests and sorting them out for Laura.”

“Why are program directors complaining about duplicating services?”

“Well, I am having to return lots of them because of errors in filling out the forms. I have also had to return a few because of inadequate preparation for duplication.”

Following my briefing on the new system for document duplication I called in the assistant.

“Molly Bee’s duplicating system is not working out too well.”

“I know it. Maybe we need more time. Perhaps we should give it a few more weeks so that everybody can learn the new system.”

“I don’t think so. Things are already sufficiently messed up. I think I have to do something now.”

“I figured you would. I knew you wouldn’t like it. Shall I release Laura?”

“Hell no! Laura is doing a good job with the duplication. Fire Molly Bee. She is the one that doesn’t have a damn thing to do.”