

Chapter 4:

The Management of Small Ministries

It has already been noted that interpersonal relationships in small states are generally very different from those in large states. This feature affects the operation of ministries as much as other bodies, and may require special management procedures. In the highly personalised atmosphere of small ministries, when everything goes well it is possible to develop a strong team spirit. However, there is also a danger of serious tension and division. This issue is examined in the first two sections of this chapter.

The third section turns to dissemination of information. Although in small ministries people are often well informed by word of mouth, this cannot be taken for granted. Examples are presented of problems which have arisen because senior administrators have simply assumed that their staff have been well informed. Even in small ministries it is necessary to formalise mechanisms for dissemination of information.

Fourthly, the chapter turns to management of staff absence. In a small ministry the absence of one or two individuals, e.g. for annual leave or an overseas meeting, can raise much greater problems than it would in a large ministry. Development of teams, discussed in the fifth section, is among the ways to reduce these problems. Good team work can also promote efficiency, effectiveness and general morale.

Finally, the chapter discusses inter-ministry links. Of course these are essential in large as well as small states; but in the latter they may be a more prominent feature of daily life because the total system is small and because the contributions of individuals with scarce talents and expertise are often needed outside the Ministry of Education as well as within it.

1. Management in a Highly Personalised Environment

Whereas in medium-sized and large states the workplace is generally

separate from individuals' out-of-work activities, in small states many types of relationship are inextricably intertwined. Decision-makers are conscious of who is related to whom, who went to school with whom, and who has what influence in the parliament, town council, social club, church, etc..

Such networks have a strong positive side. Decision-makers have a wider view of the range of influences on specific situations and of the implications of their decisions. Wider relationships may also strengthen loyalties within the organisation. As noted in Jersey:

Intimacy can contribute to excellent teamwork in which the strengths and weaknesses of individuals are well known, and in which 'playing to strengths' produces good results. Close relationships may also speed decision-making, and can generate trust and confidence.

However, a highly personalised environment can also be problematic. As the Jersey case study continued:

First, innovation can be more difficult if it is 'known' that a particular person will be opposed to new ideas. Second, differences of personality may produce conflicts which are not easy to resolve in a small organisation. Conflicts can consume energy and time which would otherwise be directed at the Department's objectives, and the loss is proportionately greater in a small Department.

In a small society the potential for favouritism is greater, and official policies and procedures may be thwarted because 'friends-of-friends' have strong influence. Also, as noted in the St. Lucia case study, individuals may find it difficult to adjust from family and collegial relationships to the roles of superordinate/subordinate. Such factors may seriously reduce the efficiency and effectiveness of a ministry's operation.

Moreover, social divisions that are created or exacerbated by inappropriate management styles may take years to heal. On the one hand, once a position is taken, people may find it difficult to retract; and on the other hand, people get characterised in ways that they do not deserve. It was for the latter reason that the quotation from the Jersey case study put the word 'known' into inverted commas. Once perceptions have formed they may be difficult to change; and in this sense a good reputation can be as undeserved as a bad one. The onus is on senior management to be open-minded, and to maintain impartiality even under political pressure. Implied also is the importance of manage-

ment training as a vehicle for empowering senior management personnel to deal with these situations.

A further problem in small states, noted for example in the Seychelles study, is that administrators who make mistakes and are publicly or unofficially discredited have no distant postings to which to run. Nor can they easily gain second chances in different organisations elsewhere in the national capital. They have to face the consequences of their actions, not only on the job but also in the community. In this respect, officials in small states are more vulnerable than their counterparts in larger states.

Many administrators handle these situations by adhering closely to the rules. As noted in the Brunei Darussalam case study:

The existence of personal links may lead to an expectation among colleagues that agreement over particular issues will necessarily be forthcoming, i.e. that it will be more difficult to say "no". Those experiencing such pressure may appeal to procedures specified by the Ministry or in the General Order in an effort to depersonalise their decisions.

The authors added the need for caution and consistency:

Any lack of frankness is likely to be exposed in the longer run in such a small setting, and could be counterproductive.

Many governments also reduce interpersonal problems by using higher-level structures for final decision-making. In St. Lucia, for example, final decisions on appointment, discipline and dismissal of teachers are made by the Teaching Service Commission. The Public Service Commission is a parallel body for civil servants. The fact that recommendations on teachers made by the Ministry of Education must be approved by the Teaching Service Commission protects staff in the Ministry from accusations of favouritism. In the case of civil servants, moreover, the recommendations of the Ministry of Education are routed through the Ministry of Personnel. A similar system operates in Barbados. It may be argued that distancing of the decision-making process from the immediate divisional head weakens his direction and control over the unit concerned. However, diffusion of the locus of decision-making helps protect the interests and reputations of the individuals concerned.

Adherence to Bureaucratic Rules

Administrators in small states often have to follow bureaucratic rules much more closely than their counterparts in larger states.

To those who are not familiar with small states, this fact may be surprising. Small states are frequently characterised as highly personalised places in which everybody knows everybody else, and some observers assume that this permits much greater flexibility.

However, it is because small states are highly personalised that adherence to bureaucratic rules becomes essential.

Without such adherence, there is a strong likelihood of social strife following accusations of favouritism.

Such accusations are certainly found in larger states. But because large societies are more diffuse, the impact of individual cases may be less serious or longlasting. Small states are more transparent, and the actions of individuals are known and commented upon much more widely than in large states.

2. Decision-Making Styles

Decision-making styles of course depend to a great extent on the personalities of the individuals making the decisions, and on the cultures in which they operate. As such one would expect wide variation, both within and among small states. Nevertheless, it is still possible to make some general observations.

A first point, linked to the observation about officers' multiple out-of-work connections, concerns formalisation of decisions which have been shaped informally. In all small societies officers hold informal discussions after work at the sports club, in the bar, in each others' homes, etc.. Sometimes, decision-making processes can be left informal; but on other occasions informal discussions should be followed up, formalised and set down on paper. Such formalisation might involve other people, both subordinate and superior, who feel that they should be part of the decision-making process, and would help reduce the dangers of rumour and backbiting. But sometimes decisions made

through informal channels are better left unrecorded, in order to avoid unnecessary conflict and frustration.

A second point returns to what in Chapter 1 was described as the need for 'managed intimacy' in small states. The effect of this on decision-making in at least one setting was indicated in the Brunei Darussalam case study, which noted that the management style has to reflect the need to sustain workable relationships at many levels. As a result:

There is often an expressed preference for requesting or persuading rather than instructing. Individuals may be particularly sensitive to criticism which is open and confrontational in the 'western' mode. They may prefer more indirect, which are seen locally as more sensitive, means to resolve problems. This includes the consultative approach....

Of course this approach also reflects broad cultural aspects, and avoidance of confrontation may also be a feature of decision-making in large societies. However, the emphasis on consultation may be particularly important in small societies. Fortunately, it may also be easier to achieve.

Consultation was also stressed in the Seychelles case study, which further observed that administrators in small systems have the strong advantage that they are able to know personally the main actors in all parts of the system. The authors recommended that:

officers should make the effort to get to know everyone in the Ministry from top to bottom. One way to do this is to organise periods in which Ministry staff live together for two or more days and devote 'brain storming' sessions to identification of problems and bottlenecks. Solutions can be formulated in small groups that have an informal atmosphere of frank and quiet reflection. These small groups should be composed of staff from different sections and ranks. This living together can facilitate understanding of human behaviour, and can promote interaction among co-workers. It can also permit senior staff to identify new talents, re-examine existing impressions, and monitor the performance of young officers.

Administrators elsewhere may be less enthusiastic about residential sessions away from the ministry. However, the point about the special advantages gained by administrators in small states is important. It was paralleled in the Barbados case study, the author of which wrote:

Systematically getting to know each officer on a one-to-one basis helps senior staff to maximise the advantages of a small organisation. This would be impossible in a large ministry, but can easily be achieved in a small one. I have already embarked on this task with gratifying results.



In small states, the emphasis on consultation in decision-making may be particularly important. And administrators in small states have the strong advantage that they can know personally the main actors in all parts of the system.

3. Dissemination of Information

The case study on Guyana pointed out that the nature of societies in small states may influence dissemination of information. The fact that in a small ministry many officers have long personal contact and intimate knowledge of each others' backgrounds:

provides an opportunity to ensure that information and the subtle details of policy can be communicated along informal channels.

Also, in Guyana relatively junior functionaries believe themselves entitled to access to all senior staff:

It is not unusual for junior officers to seek redress from the Permanent Secretary or Minister if they believe their points of view have not been given adequate hearing or if they believe that they have information which should reach the top quickly....

However, these networks make it easier to influence decision-makers in dis-information and character assassination. The networks may also lead to confusion when information becomes distorted by extensive informal repetition.

The case study on St. Lucia presented a parallel perspective. It noted that the 'grapevine' is a very powerful agent in small ministries. Human-interest information, both positive and negative, tends to flow quickly within this informal network. People rapidly find out about promotions, transfers, sickness, personal accidents, etc..

However, other types of information may circulate less rapidly. As the St. Lucia case study added:

the word of a meeting to be convened certainly does not spread as quickly. Indeed the administrator must ensure that the information is delivered to the individuals concerned, preferably in writing, as they tend to complain that they misunderstood the dates, times, or venues of the meetings. Formal communication therefore requires a considerable amount of effort involving memoranda, circulars and telephone messages.

It is clear that this viewpoint would be widely echoed. The Solomon Islands case study highlighted a curriculum workshop which was to be opened by Ministry officials. Although the officials were informed, communication was inadequate with the teachers. As a result, the officials turned up to an empty hall. Likewise the Kiribati case study described a case in which two new curriculum officers were appointed. The supervising officers assumed that the appointees were conversant with a consultancy report which had led to the creation of their jobs, and therefore that the officers understood the nature of both their jobs and the whole unit. Unfortunately the two officers had never seen the report, and without proper briefing by the supervising officer they spent one week doing virtually nothing.

When this Kiribati incident came to light, the Secretary for Education called a meeting of supervising officers and stressed the need to brief both new and old subordinates personally in order to encourage

questions and ensure understanding. This, he suggested, should be done at least once a month, with dates set well in advance. The Secretary also introduced briefing folders required to be available for inspection at any time.

Formal systems for dissemination of information also exist in other Ministries. In Jersey, standard instructions ensure that documents and letters are copied to appropriate section heads, and items dealing with current business are circulated among senior managers before filing. The system is not infallible, but it does at least help broaden awareness.

Yet it is obvious that small ministries cannot to produce the range of circulars and sophisticated newsletters of large ministries. Also, some bureaucracies have so many coordination meetings that the officers have little time for actual implementation. Nevertheless, good managers do succeed in ensuring good information flow. They use their judgement to ensure that all essential material is put in circulars but that individuals are not swamped by vast amounts of unnecessary paper. The essential point is that they do not *assume* that information has been disseminated simply because they are working in small organisations.

4. Allowing for Staff Absence

Another problem faced more acutely by small than by larger ministries arises from the absence of individuals, e.g. for personal leave, sickness, study or overseas travel. In a large ministry, the absence of a few individuals may not cause much inconvenience, particularly if they do not occupy key roles. But in a small ministry the same number of individuals would represent a greater proportion of the total workforce.

In such situations, if organisations lack effective management procedures the absence of individuals may cause major problems. First, the work of those individuals ceases until they return. This causes difficulties for people who need services to be performed. And if officers know that when they go away they will have to work even harder on their return, they may begin to make excuses to avoid travelling. In this case the new problem arising is that study tours and external visits are not undertaken, and important meetings are not attended.

To avoid such difficulties, it is necessary to ensure that:

- all concerned (i.e. both the individuals themselves and the organisations which call meetings) make careful assessments of whether travel really is necessary on each occasion;
- even if one individual is primarily responsible for a specific task

(e.g. selecting scholarship holders, or computing statistics), at least one other individual is aware of basic procedures and can take over if necessary;

- officers are required to prepare clear instructions for work which they expect to arise while they are away;
- more than one individual has authority to sign financial and other documents,
- records are orderly, complete and accessible; and
- individuals are discouraged from interpreting their own duty statements too narrowly.

Mutual understanding of colleagues' work may build up automatically when people expand their experience by taking different promotion posts, or when individuals are away and their colleagues cover for them. It may also be useful to rotate certain responsibilities among staff, and to appoint officially-recognised deputies. In some countries senior staff are also required to submit monthly reports of work done and objectives achieved. These reports both inform colleagues and enable them to assist if any officer has to be absent.

The Barbados authorities take this type of system one stage further by encouraging use of official diaries in which officers should make entries about each important event. The diaries are not to be taken away, but should be left at the desks relating to particular posts. The authorities also stress the importance of clear record-keeping. Supervisors should ensure that when they or those they supervise are away from their desks, careful notes are made on matters to be followed up during the period of absence. Notes should be put on file, and should indicate relevant file references, deadlines, contact persons, etc..

The ministry in St. Lucia also has a good system to reduce the problems of staff absence. Incoming and outgoing correspondence on matters of interest to the general administration and to specific sections is circulated to heads before signatures are appended. This requires circulation of a lot of paper; but it means that if any officer is absent, the others have at least some knowledge of the matter at hand. Information on highly confidential matters is of course not circulated in this way. For example, the Permanent Secretary may have access to information which should not be divulged to his deputy or to heads of sections. In this case it is difficult for the deputy to act when the Permanent Secretary is absent. But when the Permanent Secretary is away for an extended period, he uses his judgement on what information should be given to whom.

Technology to some extent reduces the problems arising from absence, but may also increase them. The good side is that technology

allows individuals who are far away to be contacted by telephone and fax. Also, the fact that computers make data-processing systems much more efficient releases staff time for other activities. However the other side, recognised for example in the Dominica case study, is that computers may make information less accessible than old-fashioned record cards. Unless computing expertise is held by several people, work may be seriously disrupted by the absence of key individuals. Senior administrators should be aware of this when designing new information-processing systems and when selecting people to operate them.

5. Building Teams

The previous section stresses the value of team work to cover for individuals who are absent. Team work may also of course have additional benefits. It may promote coordination and effectiveness, and may raise staff morale.

Development of team approaches is in some respects easier in small than in large states. When individuals are multi-functional, a small team may cover a wider range of responsibilities. It may therefore be easier to achieve broader perspectives and satisfactory coordination. Many governments of small states should make better use of this opportunity.

Barbados is one country in which great emphasis has been placed on team work and shared decision-making. Although the Minister has the main power, in practice he shares it with the senior staff. The Minister chairs an Educational Planning and Development Committee (EPADEC), which discusses policy matters. The author of the Barbados case study indicated that "the EPADEC is a very important body of which we in the Ministry are very proud".

It will be obvious, however, that good team work depends on trust and mutual respect. Where these relationships do not exist, they can never be replaced by handbooks and instructions. This was realised by the authorities in Montserrat, who therefore organised a team-building workshop, which they made residential and during which they forbade non-emergency telephone calls. According to one participant, the workshop built up a team spirit so effectively that "passing acquaintances turned into 'buddy-friends', and friends became like siblings".

Team work does have two potential drawbacks. First, it often takes much longer to reach a decision; and second, it may be difficult to identify individuals who deserve praise when affairs go well or blame when affairs go badly. Neither problem is insuperable, but both need

to be borne in mind.

However it is also worth noting the observation of a Permanent Secretary in Anguilla: "If you do not spend the time to get a consensus, you will waste other, scarcer resources." Small states may have special advantages in developing team work, and authorities would be well advised to try to utilise these advantages.

6. Inter-Ministry Links

Inter-ministry links are of course important in all states, both small and large. But in small states they are likely to assume a more prominent place in the daily life of individual ministries. They can also make major demands on those ministries.

Table 5 illustrates this point by showing some external bodies of which officers in the Ministry of Education & Culture in St. Lucia are members. Many staff have additional commitments of an *ad hoc* nature, e.g. on interview panels, planning committees, etc.. Officers may also be members of regional bodies, such as the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) and committees of the University of the West Indies (UWI).

Involvement with external bodies can be very useful:

- the officers gain experience which they can use in their main work, and they expand their circle of contacts;
- the skill that individuals display in work with external bodies enhances their reputations and as a result the image of the Ministry;
- external contacts add interest and help to circumvent boredom; and, not the least important,
- scarce skills are used to maximum advantage to serve the country as a whole.

However, the activities may also have a problematic side:

- the demands of the external bodies may be onerous and draining;
- the number of required meetings may cause officers either to neglect their home base or to perform their external commitments inadequately; and
- officers may find themselves enmeshed in conflicts of interest.

Table 5: Officers' Involvement in Other Government Bodies, Ministry of Education & Culture, St. Lucia**Permanent Secretary**

- Vice Chairman, St. Lucia Development Bank Student Loans Scheme
- Chairman, National Task Force for Discipline
- Member of several Cabinet-appointed committees, including
 - Training Committee
 - Housing Committee
 - Reclassification Committee
 - Government Tenders Board
- Member, Sir Arthur Lewis Community College Board of Governors
- Member, Independence Day Celebrations Committee

Principal Assistant Secretary

- Chairman, Education Subcommittee, National Committee for Disaster Amelioration

Senior Accountant

- Member, National Carnival Development Committee

Statistician

- Member, National Population Council

Chief Education Officer

- Member, Government Salary Negotiating Team
- Member, Central Emergency Organisation

Education Officer (Curriculum)/Acting Deputy CEO

- Board Member, Radio St. Lucia

Education Officer (Pre-Schools)

- Member, National Council for the Disabled

Labour Market Information Counterpart

- Member, Road Safety Board

District Education Officer (Area 1)

- Member, Independence Day Celebrations Committee

Specialist Supervisor (Art)

- Member, Independence Day Celebrations Committee

Director of Culture

- Member, Independence Day Celebrations Committee
- Member, National Carnival Development Committee

These points were reflected in several case studies. For example the Montserrat study noted that external involvements:

consume valuable time which could have been invested in direct educational administration, but they give Ministry officials valuable knowledge of and insights into contemporary developments which impact on, and which are impacted on by, the educational enterprise. They can acquire a broader view of the environment and culture in which they operate. Indeed their own education is enhanced and their horizons widened.

The Botswana, Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Barbados case studies presented similar viewpoints.

It must be added that contribution of services to other ministries need not be just a one-way process, for the Ministry of Education may also benefit from the expertise of individuals elsewhere. One useful strategy is for the Ministry of Education to encourage its officers to work for other organisations on the understanding that 'credits' could be built up and exchanged for expertise which those organisations have but which the Ministry of Education lacks.

The challenge for senior administrators is therefore to judge which external commitments should be welcomed and which should be resisted. The multitude of external as well as internal commitments also emphasises the importance of efficient management of time, to ensure that all essential tasks are done properly.

7. Summary

This chapter began with discussion of management issues in the personalised environment of small states. Close interpersonal relationships can be a strong advantage, but they need to be handled carefully. The first section noted the need for ministries to have clear operational procedures, and stressed the need for impartiality even under political pressure. For harmonious and productive operation, such impartiality must not only exist; it must also be seen to exist.

The second section approached the related topic of decision-making. It noted that decision-making styles of course depend on the cultures and personalities concerned, but that small states perhaps have a stronger need for decision-making by consensus. This analysis fitted into the framework of 'managed intimacy' introduced in Chapter 1.

The chief message of the third section was that even in small ministries it is necessary to pay attention to mechanisms for dissemina-

tion of information. Examples were presented of problems that had arisen because senior administrators simply assumed that information had been disseminated when in fact it had not.

Fourthly, the chapter noted that in small ministries the absence of individuals may have a much more serious effect than it would in larger ministries. To reduce difficulties it is necessary to maintain good record-keeping and briefing systems. It is also important for individuals to be multi-functional, able to cover for their colleagues. It helps if the Ministry has developed good teamwork. Some experiences in this aspect were described in Section 5.

Finally, the chapter discussed inter-ministry links. Of course these are important in medium-sized and large ministries as well as small ones; but in small ministries they are more likely to form a prominent feature of daily life. The challenge for senior administrators is to keep external commitments in balance. This requires good time-management and selectivity.

Further Reading

- Chruden, Herbert J. & Sherman, Arthur W. (1984): *Managing Human Resources*, South-Western Publishing Co., Cincinnati.
- Commonwealth Secretariat, The (1989): *Strategic Planning and Performance Management in the Public Service: Report of a Regional Workshop for the Small States of the Caribbean*, Management Development Programme, The Commonwealth Secretariat, London.
- Farrugia, Charles & Attard, Paul (1989): *The Multi-Functional Administrator: Educational Development in the Small States of the Commonwealth*, The Commonwealth Secretariat, London.
- Kersell, J.E. (1990): 'Team management and development in Montserrat and Anguilla', *Public Administration and Development*, Vol.10, No.1.
- Klingner, Donald E. (1983): *Public Administration: A Management Approach*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston.
- Pieper, Rudiger (1990): *Human Resource Management: An International Comparison*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin.