

How Do Public Managers Manage?

Carolyn Ban

How Do Public Managers Manage?

Bureaucratic Constraints,
Organizational Culture, and the
Potential for Reform




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Preface

It has become somewhat of a truism that government managers face a range of constraints that limit their ability to manage and that they are more constrained than are private managers (Allison, 1980). Managers themselves bemoan the fact that it is hard to hire and fire, and that they are given little discretion in how to manage their budgets. Academics decry the dysfunctional effects of rigid controls imposed on federal agencies by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) (Wilson, 1989; DiIulio, Garvey, and Kettl, 1993), and some call for solutions such as contracting out the government's work (Savas, 1982). There have been increasingly broad calls for reform—for deregulation that would loosen the constraints managers labor under and for changing the culture of government that has grown up within this rigid system, a culture that is seen as overly cautious and risk-averse (DiIulio, 1994; National Performance Review, 1993a; Osborne and Gaebler, 1992).

Yet there have been few empirical studies of how bureaucratic constraints actually affect managers' behavior. To assess the desirability of deregulation and of reducing bureaucratic constraint, we need to have a much more nuanced understanding of the effects the current system actually has on how managers manage. In particular, we need to understand how official rules and regulations are interpreted and implemented in different organizational settings. And we need to look at the range of ways that managers find to operate within or to circumvent the formal systems of constraint. This work provides an empirical basis for advancing our

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understanding of the effects of bureaucratic constraints. Based on research in four federal agencies, it examines managers' reactions to constraints stemming from the civil service system and the budget process, focusing particularly on how coping strategies differ across agencies. It derives from this research some conclusions about the need for reform and the likelihood of reform, given the current political environment.

Audience

This book is designed for several audiences. Students of public management, particularly those concerned with civil service and budgetary systems, should find in this study a somewhat different picture of these systems from the one offered in the standard texts. The book may therefore be used to supplement texts in introductory courses in public administration, as well as in courses in human resources management and public management. The research reported here should also be of interest to scholars in the field of public management, and should, I hope, advance the scholarly debate about deregulation.

Practitioners, both in the federal government and at other levels of government, should find much that is useful to them. While this book is not designed to be a how-to manual, for reasons I explore in the conclusion, it may give managers a sense that they are not alone in struggling to find positive ways to deal with the highly restrictive web of constraints in which they feel enmeshed, and it may encourage them to push against these constraints more effectively.

Finally, the book is intended to contribute to the policy debate over deregulation in government. At the federal level, attempts to loosen the constraints discussed here are being made even as this book is being completed. Reform of the procurement system has been passed, in the form of the Federal Acquisition Improvement Act, signed by President Clinton on October 13, 1994. And the

National Performance Review (NPR) has proposed sweeping reforms of the civil service and budgetary systems discussed here. This research can add to the policy discussion about the need for such reforms; it can help us to understand what pitfalls will be encountered in implementing changes; and in the event that changes do take place, it can serve as a baseline of comparison for future research on the effects of reform.

Overview of the Contents

The introduction to the book explores the issue of bureaucratic constraints—the main types of constraint, where they came from, and what purpose they were designed to serve. It then examines some of the arguments in favor of deregulation and looks at current proposals for loosening bureaucratic constraints, particularly those contained in the National Performance Review. Finally, it describes the research approach used in conducting the study on which this book is based.

Part One provides a contextual framework for discussing how public managers manage. Since one of the central themes of the book is that managers are likely to cope differently with bureaucratic constraints depending on the organization in which they work, Chapter One begins with an introduction to the organizations in the study and a discussion of how they differ on such key variables as mission, size, structure, resources, and leadership. A central focus of this chapter is the organizational cultures of the four organizations studied and the ways these cultures differ on certain dimensions that are relevant to how managers cope with bureaucratic constraints.

In Chapter Two, the discussion moves down to the level of the individual manager. Here I look at how organizational differences affect managers themselves—the kinds of people selected to be managers, the career paths they are likely to follow, and the management training they receive. I then turn to an analysis of the managerial role. I look at the dilemmas faced by what I term

“worker managers” at all levels, but particularly first-line supervisors, who have to combine the tasks of management with the daily technical work of their organization. Attention is also given to the even greater dilemmas of what I call “pseudo-supervisors”—people who are officially classed as supervisors but who actually perform very few supervisory functions. Chapter Two concludes with a discussion of how managers see their roles. Utilizing the “competing values” model of management roles, I show that managers in different organizations as well as at different organizational levels stress different parts of the management role.

Part Two explores the problems created for managers by the civil service system and the range of strategies managers use for coping with the system. In Chapter Three, I turn to the world of the personnel specialists. I look at the formal civil service system, focusing on the role conflicts it creates for the personnel staff charged with administering it. I then examine the different ways that the personnel staffs in the four agencies have dealt with this role conflict, and the implications of these different approaches for the personnel staff’s relationship with managers. One approach to managing this relationship is the creation of “shadow” personnel offices within line organizations.

Chapter Four explores the labyrinth of the hiring process. I look at the range of ways both managers and personnelists define their roles in that process and at the strategies some managers use to find short-cuts through the maze.

Chapter Five treats the processes for disciplining or firing employees. It examines the factors that cause managers to avoid dealing with problems—both external factors, such as the complexity of the process, and internal factors, including managers’ role definitions and lack of preparation for this aspect of management.

Part Three focuses on areas in which the civil service rules intersect with the budget process to constrain managers. Chapter Six focuses on the position classification system, used for setting pay in government. I argue that this system is really a budgetary control system masquerading as a personnel system. Chapter Seven

examines how managers cope with personnel ceilings, hiring freezes, and reductions in force.

Finally, the conclusion discusses the implications of this research for managers and policy makers. It raises questions about what individual managers can do to work more effectively within the existing system and, perhaps more importantly, looks at the likelihood of success of current reform efforts designed to loosen the constraints managers face.

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Carolyn Ban

The Author

Carolyn Ban is associate professor in the Department of Public Administration and Policy at the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy of the University at Albany, State University of New York, where she also directs the Masters in Public Administration program. She received her B.A. degree (1964) in government from Smith College, her M.A. degree (1966) in regional area studies of the Soviet Union from Harvard University, and her Ph.D. degree (1975) in political science from Stanford University. Prior to joining the faculty at SUNY, Albany, she directed a research unit at the U.S. Office of Personnel Management.

Her research has focused on human resources management, and particularly on civil service reform. She has coedited two books: *Legislating Bureaucratic Change: The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978* (1984, with P. W. Ingraham) and *Public Personnel Management: Current Concerns, Future Challenges* (1991, with N. M. Riccucci). In addition, she has published numerous articles on civil service and labor relations issues.

Ban has served as chair of the Section on Personnel and Labor Relations of the American Society for Public Administration and has provided consulting services to a number of federal and state agencies and to the World Bank.