FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, OMERRI
(Office of the Director of Administration)

LECTURES TO ADMINISTRATIVE AND EXECUTIVE STAFF - 1983-84 SESSION

No. 20 - SOME NEGLECTED ASPECTS OF ADMINISTRATION

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The title is deliberately provocative. I want to draw attention to some aspects that, if not altogether neglected, I feel are commonly underrated, but about which each person can take action for him or herself. When I make critical observations, I am drawing on past experience elsewhere more than on what I have seen here, but what I have to say is, I believe, generally applicable.

First, a reminder of aspects of the good administrator from the earliest lectures. He or she has:

(i) Good executive ability, and achieves results smoothly, promptly and effectively.

(ii) Ability to detect and follow up the need for consultation, to clear the way for action.

(iii) Ability to construct and keep records and retrieve data from them.

(iv) Firmness to stand by proper procedures, including advising on procedures for changing previous decisions where appropriate.

(v) Ability to look ahead and devise or adapt administrative systems to meet developing needs.

(vi) A good standard of presentation in oneself and in the work produced.

Since then we have looked at many aspects of university organization and work. Now I want to fill in some cracks and crevices, to complete a strong structure. Things I will mention are not necessarily the most important aspects of administration, but ones that I would certainly not like to be overlooked.

Indeed, I believe they are essential to achieving success as an administrator.

1. Check back to sources: Know how to get at sources

Many times one witnesses (not necessarily here is meant) wasted discussions and efforts, and even bad decisions because nobody (sometimes including administrators) has checked back to source, to make sure facts, or what the law is, or on the University regulations or a previous decision. People will sometime talk confidently as if they were sure they knew, when in fact they are incorrect, or are in apparent ignorance or forgetfulness of there being some source to refer to at all. The administrator should check the sources when questions arise. Do not be too sure you know yourself. The corollary is that one has to know what the sources are and be able to lay hands on them.

I hope you are aware of the various sources already available. These include the Basic Policy Guidelines, the Master Plan, the Senior and Junior Staff Regulations, the Student Handbook, and others. You personally may not have your own copy of all these, but they should be available in your Unit's office. Circulars from my office or others should also be available. When we have the Calendar, the Handbook of Administrative Procedures and the Digest of Statistics out, they will be additional major sources all administrators should be familiar with.
Each administrator should try to get together those needed in the particular job. For example, anyone concerned with interviews and appointments needs to be able to get at and produce facts from:

- The Recurrent Estimates, showing the approved establishments
- The Staff List, showing what posts are filled.
- The relevant Scheme of Service, showing the basis of making appointments (this is another compilation we are trying to get out).
- Salary Scales.

Any one dealing with examinations needs to refer to the Academic Regulations. And so on.

Build up your office collections of reference documents, keep them up to date, hand over when you change jobs, and above all, get to know them, and refer to them to check matters up. Before going to meetings go over the papers, think about what reference documents may be needed, and take them with you.

To amplify what the Legal Adviser said about the laws, as our Library does not have the codified laws, the best place to go when you need to check on a law is the Ministry of Justice Library, Owerri. They have the codified laws of the Federation and Eastern Nigeria that are still the basis, plus annual volumes of legislation enacted after the codifications until very recently, and finally gazettes for very recent legislation. They also cross-reference amendments to the original law, which is very helpful, and they can help you to find what you need. Incidentally, showing that you have facts and regulations at your finger tips, and can quickly give a committee accurate information, is the best preparation for making committees ready to hear your advice. So I repeat, check back to sources, and know how to find those sources.

2. Be Your own Chief Clerk

This implies no disrespect to our clerical staff, but is only like saying that the Foreman or the Technical Officer should be able to guide a Craftsman under him. There are general principles of filing that clerical staff learn and apply, but the system can and should be shaped and adapted to meet the needs of the particular office. This requires that the senior officer takes an interest in, and give thought to, questions about how the system should run in that office. He/she should also be alert not only for mistakes in filing but for ways of using and refining the system too. Files are an essential tool of the trade, and should be cared for, like other tools. As the saying is, the good worker respects his tools.

In addition, the old-style Chief Clerk who could produce relevant papers from fifteen years ago is no longer to be found, and other clerical staff change more frequently now. This makes it more necessary for senior officers to make themselves familiar with the contents and arrangement of their files, and to keep an eye on things. See that copies of all papers sent out, including attachments, are kept on file and that files are in good order.

It is an advantage to an administrator to have had clerical experience, and if he or she has not it is useful to learn how the office should run. Do not regard clerical functions as below the administrator’s notice: rather, I would say, be your own Chief Clerk.

3. Work at accuracy and clarity of presentation

The need for this should be clear from your experience to date. It has already been stressed, especially in the Academic Registrar’s lecture on Committee Secretaries’ work.
Language is the most fundamental tool of our job. Most people have to work hard to develop their ability

(a) to grasp clearly

(b) to express

(c) to get over to other people, exactly what has been decided on any matter, how the decision was arrived at, and what its implications in practice are or are not. It is a key aspect of the administrator's job, and may require much effort, sweat and toil to perfect.

4. Cultivate a sense of timing

Even a simple thing like sending letters inviting people for interview involves good timing. If you do not allow adequate time or take special steps for speedy delivery, you may end up with confusion and complaints, and be an untidy administrator.

Now consider something more complex. Let us say a committee has proposed to Senate revising some regulations, and Senate says that School Boards should consider the proposals and the committee should collate and analyse the School Boards' views and submit them to Senate. This involves several stages, and at each stage papers have to be drafted, circulated, considered, results written up and passed on. If the proposals are at all complex, School Boards may want to meet more than once on them. If, in addition, matters have to be decided by a certain stage in the examinations cycle, or the admissions cycle, or whatever then there is a time limit. The Secretary of the Committee, needs to assess how long must be allowed for each stage, and whether the total time is enough. If it is not, some way may have to be found to cut corners, such as persuading School Boards to have special meetings, or speeding up the preparation of papers, or an extension of time may have to be sought if that is at all possible.

Working out timings and getting them into good order is a very important part of administration. With any problem, simple or complex, you do well to review the timing, first determining the deadline for completion, then working backwards. If the time is not enough, or is very tight, then go on to consider what to do about it. With practice, this can become second nature and, even without consciously doing any calculations, an alarm may sound in the head when it is time to start action.

This is really a case of applying Critical Path Analysis in the head. We all do it sometimes, but at times one sees people rushing frantically around at the last moment to do things that would have been simple if started in time, or getting into confusion because A is ready for action while B is not. This sense of timing should be cultivated, and put regularly into practice so that, with experience, your mental time-clock can survey complicated processes and accurately assess the time required and when a start must be made. Sometimes people allow themselves to be daunted by the apparent scale and complexity of a process but the first step may be very simple, like finding the file with last year's advertisement or circular to see whether it fits this year, or sending a routine enquiry to the Schools. Not taking that initial step in good time can throw the whole process out. So, cultivate a sense of timing, and develop the time-clock in your head.

5. Cultivate a Sense of how things interrelate

It is no good producing a lecture timetable that is perfect except that it leaves no time for student meals. But important interrelationships may arise at a much lower level. For example if meeting dates are fixed without co-ordination, clashes may occur. Or if a School is trying to hold interviews before a meeting of the Appointments and Promotions Committee, but another committee has to meet on the only available day in order to come before a Senate meeting, somebody has to work out relative priorities.
Again, something coming up in some committee, on pay, furniture for houses (Housing and Passages Section) could have implications for the Staff Regulations (Establishments Section) or a change in student admission requirements (Academic Registry) might affect student accommodation arrangements (Student Affairs).

It is part of the administrator's work to be alert for such inter-relationships, for people who need to be consulted on a proposal or informed of a decision, and to point these things out when necessary. This is also a sense that can be cultivated. It is true that sometimes inter-relationships are not obvious for lack of some knowledge, but sometimes it is because "it just didn't occur to me." In the words of the novelist E.M. Forster, "Only connect!

6. Cultivate a sense of the possible

This is a brother to the sense of timing and the sense of inter-relationships. Before coming up with a bright scheme, one should try looking at it from all angles - will it work? will those who have to implement it understand it? will it be acceptable? are there resources? and so on. In general, the simplest schemes have the best chance of being accepted and working, especially if they will almost run themselves when implemented (e.g. by using an easily understood form). Procedures with too many points where decisions have to be taken, on grounds that may not always be present to the minds of those concerned, are liable to come to grief.

Sometimes people, even wide groups, like committees, may plunge with fervour down some road which is bound to come to a dead end, due to inadequate financial or human resources, the opposition of some authority or group that cannot be overcome, some legal or moral difficulty that blocks the way, or for some other reason. If they are lucky, they may be able to retire in the end with nothing worse than embarrassment. It may sometimes be difficult for an administrator to check such fervour. In any case, his or her first responsibility is to look at the proposal as positively as may be and to make sure that the blockage really is there and cannot be removed. But if convinced that it is impossible, there is then an obligation to try to show this, which may need careful consideration of timing and tactics. In the process, one may run into the accusation once made against the British Civil Service, of finding "A difficulty to every solution", but it may be necessary to risk this.

7. Look for underlying principles

Finally, for today, ask yourself, on any aspect of the job, what are the underlying principles here? What are we trying to achieve? Is this the best way to do it? Is it well worked out? Is it worth doing at all? Sometimes a routine will run on for years after it has lost all point or has failed to embody new circumstances, or weaknesses in the system will be tolerated, in spite of inconvenience, when some adjustment in the system could remedy the weaknesses. However, in looking for the principles, do not lose sight of the details or force them into an unsuitable framework. You need to see both principles and details together.

I hope we have set up our basic systems here fairly well to meet the present circumstances, but no systems are perfect, none will last satisfactorily without change for ever, and there are always new needs emerging. It is by asking such questions that systems can be reformed, or advanced and, even if you find nothing to change now, through asking these questions you will get a fuller grasp on your job, and be able to guide others in doing their share better.

To summarise, I wish to stress:

1. Check back to sources: know how to get at sources
2. Be your own Chief Clerk
3. Work at accuracy and clarity of presentation
4. Cultivate a sense of timing: develop the time –clock in your head
5. Cultivate a sense of how things interrelate: "Only connect."
6. Cultivate a sense of the possible.
7. Look for underlying principles – but get the details right too.

In a final short lecture on 6th June I will draw the threads together, and give a brief summing up.