![Sophia]

Problems of Bureaucracy

by Sophia Tutorial

1. BUREAUCRATIC ALIENATION

Bureaucratic organization has dramatically increased efficiency in American capitalism and society, but it does cause some associated problems.

The first problem is the idea of **bureaucratic alienation**. You might feel that dealing with a bureaucracy leaves you feeling disempowered, that you're powerless to fight or go against what the bureaucracy wants. Every time you deal with a bureaucracy, in the eyes of the bureaucracy, you are dealt with as a case--there isn't concern with your personal situation or needs. The bureaucracy has to deal with everyone in the same fashion and by the same standards, in alignment with the ideas of efficiency, predictability, and control.

Interacting with a bureaucracy this way can cause you to feel dehumanized or alienated. Alienation is a vast sense of powerlessness that can induce emotional responses like isolation, sadness, and anger. It follows that bureaucratic alienation is a feeling of powerlessness as a result of dealing with a formal bureaucratic organization in society.

IN CONTEXT

You're likely familiar with the feeling of bureaucratic alienation. Think about times when you've been frustrated and felt so powerless, like there was nothing you could do. Perhaps you had to produce a document, and give it to a certain office, at a certain time; otherwise, you wouldn't get your driver's license. Suppose you fall behind on your home mortgage payments and a bank comes to foreclose your home. You might feel like, as a human being, you're entitled to your home and the leeway to make the payments later, if only given a bit more time.

However, in the eyes of the bureau, it doesn't matter. You're powerless, a case--not a human with

your own idiosyncratic situation. There's nothing you can do to combat the bureaucratic organization, and this bureaucratic alienation is one of the negative side effects of bureaucracy.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Bureaucratic Alienation
A sense of powerlessness caused by the impersonal and dehumanizing features of bureaucracy.

2. BUREAUCRATIC RITUALISM

The second problem of bureaucratic organization is called **bureaucratic ritualism**. Bureaucracies are steadfast rule followers, and bureaucratic ritualism is an adherence to rules, codes of conduct, and processes at an almost dogmatic level, so much so that it becomes possible to lose sight of the goals of the organization, by getting mired in following the formal rules. The steadfast application of processes and rules can, in fact, undermine the efficiency and the mission of the organization itself.

Rules should be means to an end. When the process and the rules are the ends themselves, bureaucratic ritualism occurs.

⚙️ **THINK ABOUT IT**

Do you ever get frustrated with the relentless rule-following, in dealing with bureaucracies or formal organizations? Have you ever thought, "If you would just break this one rule, this one time, everything would work out so much simpler, easier, and better for everybody?" Unfortunately, it doesn't work like that. Bureaucratic ritualism doesn't allow for this, and is also what's behind the common idea of 'red tape,' or getting bogged down in the process of maintaining and upholding the rules.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Bureaucratic Ritualism
A steadfast insistence on following the rules and regulations of a bureaucracy to the point of potentially undermining the bureau's goals.

3. BUREAUCRATIC INERTIA

The third problem with a bureaucratic organization is called **bureaucratic inertia**, which is the idea that once a bureaucracy is created, it tends to stay in motion. It tends to be very difficult to destroy, because bureaucratic organizations help to perpetuate themselves. They're often implemented and designed to achieve goals, but once those goals are achieved, the bureau doesn't simply go away. It's filled with people who work there, who have jobs and want to keep those jobs.

Therefore, the bureau tends to marginally shift its goals in order to remain relevant after its initial purpose has been met.

↪ EXAMPLE Bureaucratic inertia is the underlying sentiment when people say they're frustrated with wasteful government spending. Bureaucratic inertia keeps these organizations functioning after they've

outlived their usefulness.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Bureaucratic Inertia
The tendency of bureaucratic organizations to perpetuate and recreate themselves.

4. OLIGARCHY

The fourth and final problem is **oligarchy,** which is when a few people rule the masses. Bureaucratic organizations are oligarchies. There's a hierarchical ranking of authority in bureaucracies, in a pyramid shape such that there are a few people at the top who rule the masses at the bottom. This is a problem when people higher up are distanced from the public. They might feel a sense of privilege because of all the power that is concentrated at the top, which can be damaging for society.

↪ EXAMPLE Politicians are often on the receiving end of the complaint that they're disconnected and removed from the needs of the people. This is what happens with oligarchical organization.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Oligarchy
When a few people rule many people.

☑ **SUMMARY**

Today you learned about the four main problems of bureaucracy: **bureaucratic alienation**, **bureaucratic ritualism**, **bureaucratic inertia**, and **oligarchy**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.

📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

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Bureaucratic Inertia
The tendency of bureaucratic organizations to perpetuate and recreate themselves.

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A steadfast insistence on following the rules and regulations of a bureaucracy to the point of potentially undermining the bureau's goals.

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