Making Better Bureaucrats

How bureaucrats can make government more resilient and durable.
Posted Nov 15, 2017

Review of When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency. By Bernardo Zacka. Harvard University Press. 337 pp. $35

More often than not, we use the word “bureaucrat” as an insult. By their very nature, bureaucrats, we believe, are rule-obsessed, callous, petty, power-trippers. Encounters between ordinary people and “public servants” can be demeaning and disempowering.

Bureaucrats, of course, are here to stay. In all likelihood, they will have an ever-larger impact on more and more lives.

In When the State Meets the Street, Bernardo Zacka examines the experiences of front-line bureaucrats – teachers, police officers, and social service workers. Drawing on his ethnographic fieldwork in an antipoverty agency and insights from sociology and political theory, Zacka demonstrates that “lower level” bureaucrats are caught between their superiors and the street; and between the impersonal, formal norms of their profession and the personal, individuated realities as presented by their clients. Because they can and do exercise some discretion,
“tweaking existing rules, interpreting them creatively, and playing them against each other,” and thereby sacrificing consistency, he maintains, street-level bureaucrats help make government “more resilient and durable” than it otherwise would be.

In a system that cannot always or even often supply “the objective criteria” necessary for rational, consistent policy implementation, Zacka indicates, street-level bureaucrats must use their own judgment – and recognize that since policy goals vary with the context and the situation, treating people equally does not mean treating them in identical ways. Police officers, he points out, cannot arrest everyone who commits an infraction. Social welfare officials must decide whether to give extra time to individuals who have difficult speaking English or filling out paperwork. And they must interpret laws and policies that are vague. The Americans with Disabilities Act, for example, requires administrators to take into account age and educational levels, the degree to which functioning is impaired, and the likelihood that employers will perceive an individual as disabled in assessing a client’s employability.

That said, Zacka also understands the dangers attached to discretion. Street-level bureaucrats, he notes, often acquire a conception of their role. They might see themselves as caregivers or as enforcers of the rules. In doing so, they, almost inevitably, “settle the question of how to act in advance of their encounter with particular cases.” To check this tendency, Zacka recommends that every bureaucrats exercise “practices of the self,” including self-examination (to uncover proclivities and biases); perspectival change (looking at an event through a different angle); and calibration (to regulate personal involvement with clients).

Zacka also recommends a “plural regime of accountability.” Supervisors should foster “organized heterogeneity” in the workplace by recruiting bureaucrats with diverse dispositions and backgrounds. They should socialize workers into different ways of inhabiting their roles and encourage (or require) robust peer culture, with candid discussions of the handling of particular cases. Since members of a profession (most notably, police forces) may share biases that cut across role conceptions, hierarchical accountability, which involves collecting and aggregating data, and providing channels through which clients can report behavior they deem inappropriate of unacceptable, is essential.

Zacka’s principal insight, then, is deceptively simple. As they implement policies, bureaucrats should retain hierarchical, direct and professional accountability, a structure of rules and guidelines, and a commitment to transparency and consistency; at the same time, they should embrace “some measure of moral ‘muddling through’ and discretion based on context when situations present practical constraints, ambiguity, and conflicting demands.

One emerges from this insightful book with a considerable measure of respect for bureaucrats and the “impossible” expectations we have of them. Studying their experience as well as their behavior, is indeed, “an experiment in living,” as well as a test of our own values and vision. It is, or should be, humbling.