

Committees and Departmental Administration— Another Perspective

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James G. Horsfall, in his editorial "Committees, a Perspective" (PLANT DISEASE, June 1984, p. 455), undertook an analysis of the role of committees in departments and accurately pointed out the costs and dangers of exclusive reliance on committee action in decision making. He leaves the general impression that departments are in a sad way around the country and that it's too bad that old-time leadership as exemplified by L. R. Jones and others is a thing of the past. While agreeing in principle with concerns expressed by Dr. Horsfall, I want to take

friendly issue with him on certain points. For instance, he says that committees "have become the life-style in most departments" and that "domination of departments by committees is a fairly recent phenomenon." Although the exact meaning of the first statement may be debatable, both statements seem to infer that productivity in most departments is hampered by committees that are slow, ponderous, and expensive. Indeed this can be true, but it does not have to be nor is it necessarily common.

Some departments in my institution make extensive use of committees; others do not. Some have frequent and regular faculty meetings; others operate much more informally. I suspect that departments of plant pathology around the nation vary as much, and that committees are not always their life-style. If a departmental committee meets 50 times a year for a day or two at a time, as Dr. Horsfall reports, obviously something is badly wrong.

Dr. Horsfall says it is astonishing to see how the "authority of the department head has leaked away into the hands of committees." As a member of a department for some 30 years, my reaction is quite different. It is astonishing to me to see how the department head's authority has been absorbed by immediate superiors through gradual accretion of innumerable guidelines and policies to the extent that judgment even in special cases is not permitted if it runs contrary to an already imposed regulation. Indeed, if initiative is used, it is *not unlikely* that a new guideline will arise tomorrow to cover the exigency. This may be the result of what Dr. Horsfall calls "management pressures from the overorganized bureaucracy" above us. Most department heads and faculty agree that administrative decisions should be kept at the lowest level possible consistent with getting the work done. More creativity and innovations are possible when the rules are as few as possible. Unfortunately, as institutions grow, so do rules and regulations.

The principal and greatest resource in a department is the minds of its faculty. The department head's two major responsibilities are to seek support in funds, equipment, supplies, and facilities for teaching, research, and extension and to foster a climate whereby morale and enthusiasm are kept high. The second function is even more important than the first because in such an atmosphere creativity and innovation can flourish. They certainly cannot in an atmosphere where faculty are frustrated and preoccupied with complaining they have no voice in the educational or research mission of the department.

John W. Gardner, in his discussion of "renewal" in organizations (Harpers Magazine, October 1965, pp. 21-23),

states that there must be a built-in provision for self-criticism; an atmosphere must be provided where uncomfortable questions can be asked. Few leaders, strong or otherwise, can trust themselves to be adequately self-critical; the danger of self-deception is very great for all of us. The wise and judicious use of select and special committees therefore enhances the opportunity for anyone to speak up and be heard.

L. R. Jones, in his article on the relations of plant pathology to the other branches of botanical science (Phytopathology, April 1911, pp. 39-44), recognized that variety and complexity would increase with the development of the science of plant pathology, but he experienced little of the diversity we face today. It seems hardly fair, therefore, to compare his administrative methods with those used now. A great leader, L. R. Jones nonetheless led his department before the birth of many constraining and regulatory agencies, such as OMB with Circular AD-21, CGO of CSRS, EPA, FIFRA, etc. Moreover, funding was rather straightforward; competitive grants did not exist. There was no NSF, NIH, or AID. He doubtless never had to compromise his judgment with some granting agency in Washington or with a powerful commodity organization at home.

Department heads must relate in some measure to all the agencies and legislation noted above. They are supposed to know something of all the diverse activities going on in their departments. It is hard to believe that even strong leaders can pay heed to all the regulations and at the same time do a satisfactory job of recruiting graduate students and faculty, developing curriculum, implementing research and extension goals, determining use of facilities, etc., without the benefit of faculty counsel. *The quality of leadership may still rest, however, upon whether committee recommendations are accepted, modified, rejected, or ignored.*

It is not quite right, therefore, to say that the rise of departmental committees today is the result of department heads failing, then relying on committees to do their work. It is just as likely that department heads today fail because they refuse to accept counsel from responsible faculty peers.

As the noted historian Barbara Tuchman pointed out in *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World Before the War* (The Macmillan Company, 1966), "there is a temptation [when looking at the past] to be misled by the people of the times themselves who in looking back see that earlier part of their lives or careers, misted over by a lovely sunset haze of peace and serenity. The golden age did not seem golden when they were in the midst of it." Doubt, frustration, inaction, and ponderous argument and prose most likely were also a part of L. R. Jones's day.

In conclusion, the use of committees is often abused, but in this complex and hopefully enlightened age their use is unavoidable. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, the use of committees may be the worst administrative mechanism available, unless we dispense with them altogether.

During my term as a department head I grew increasingly grateful for the counsel and assistance of several key committees who helped to chart the course of curriculum during changing times, to recruit graduate students and faculty, and to develop and allocate greenhouse, laboratory, and classroom space—all hopefully consistent with the goals of the department.

For all those faculty who gave even one hour of their time in behalf of our common professional aspirations, I am deeply appreciative, and with my colleagues in other departments, I hope, with a fair degree of assurance, that few careers have been delayed, hampered, or ruined. L. R. Jones may not have been "hindered nor helped by committees," but many department heads and the profession itself are being aided today by the dedicated interest of concerned faculty.

I suspect this is the way it ought to be.