

Governance and Society Review (GSR)

Volume 1 Issue 2, Fall 2022


ISSN (P): 2959-1619, ISSN (E): 2959-1627

Homepage: <https://journals.umt.edu.pk/index.php/gsr>



Article QR



- Title:** Buses Make the World Go Round
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- DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.32350/gsr.12.06>
- History:** Received: August 11, 2022, Revised: October 28, 2022, Accepted: December 20, 2022, Published: December 30, 2022
- Citation:** Manzoor, A., John, A., & Arif, S. (2022). Buses make the world go round. *Governance and Society Review*, 1(2), 124–132. <https://doi.org/10.32350/gsr.12.06>
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- Conflict of Interest:** Author(s) declared no conflict of interest



A publication of The School of Governance and Society
University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

Buses Make the World Go Round

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Abstract

This case study is based on a situation faced by a public university official and provides opportunity to apply management concepts learnt in class. This case study presents a factual situation; however, for reasons of privacy and confidentiality the persons, organizations, and location are disguised. It highlights the dynamics of problems and decision making in bureaucratic public organizations under the influence of powerful actors. Bureaucratic organizations follow strict and impersonal rules within a legal and formal authority system. A well-defined chain of command in a hierarchical structure should provide opportunities for procedural correctness, standardization and impersonal work environment (Rainey, [2009](#)). However, over emphasis on bureaucratic tenants may result in slow decision making, communication barriers and undue delays. Such lack of flexibility deters initiatives for creativity and innovation resulting in bureaucratic inertia (Purnomo et al., [2021](#)). This case study focuses on internal and external actors who have to work with limited resources. Slow pace of technology adaptation in public sector adds to the problem. It also provides an opportunity to discuss the changes associated with the difference in work environments in public and private organizations. Obstacles in efficient communication, decision making, and bureaucratic hurdles in an organization are central to the situation presented in this case study.

Keywords: University, Competitive Advantage, management

Introduction

Background

As an only public institution in the country that specialized in teaching languages, it had a unique advantage. Students from across the country arrived to learn modern languages with high demand in the market for such skills. The recent geopolitical emphasis on the region had also added to the importance of communication in different languages. Over four decades of

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existence as an institution, its administration and staff were complacently set in their ways. They were very clear about the work expectations in the bureaucratic environment (Borry et al., [2018](#)). The required policies and controls including curriculum, examinations and student evaluation had been refined over the years, the administration and teachers were set in their routines.

As part of the revival of education system, and giving due regard to the performance of the institution, Federal government had recently given it charter to work as a University. New education policy also called for universities to upgrade and offer a variety of disciplines at par with the prevailing world academic standards and demands of a global job market. Furthermore, Federal government had allocated unprecedented amount of funds to the universities as part of recent policy to promote education in the country.

Senior officials including Director Administration, Director Finance, and Director Academics were all rankers who had started at the lowest level and overnight moved over to top pay grades when the charter was granted. They have been able to do that with a rare joint effort in a bureaucratic public organization that called for some intricate interpretations of the new by laws. Mid and lower level employees were typical public sector employees with firm belief in a less paying but secure government job. Promotion was based on the seniority system based on Annual Confidential Report (ACR) irrespective of the performance. As a result there was a general atmosphere of getting by with minimum work output. Education was a different story as majority of the head of departments had a PhD in the respective language from a country where it was the official language, while other faculty has had some kind of training in that particular language. Pay scales were typical of public sector and were not market based. Faculty was attracted to this institution for its secure public sector employment and a place where there was an opportunity to share mutual affection of teaching various languages.

Due to its diverse course offerings that covered almost all the languages in the modern world, it attracted students from all corners of the country. The student body also consisted of a significant number of foreign students who were keen to learn different languages. To cater to their needs it offered a wide range of courses from short certificates to post graduate degrees in affiliation with a nearby federal university before the charter was granted.

Location of University

The University was located in a small town nearby a big city. It offered hostel (dormitory) facilities with limited capacity to a small fraction of students with preference given to foreign students. A large majority of students live in private hostels in the nearby city while some others share rented houses. To facilitate students, university runs a bus service that covers almost all the student residential hubs.

Fees

As a public sector entity it was able to offer its programs at highly subsidized fees. This alone accounted for a significant number of students from low income segment of society. However, it was difficult to raise fees to provide all student facilities due to the prevailing social economic situation of the country. For a nominal charge any student could opt for the transportation facility.

Competitive Advantage

Unique course offerings at low affordable fees, comparatively easy placement in job market for graduates in foreign language, and being a public sector organization it enjoyed a unique competitive advantage. Whatever it lacked in terms of accommodation arrangements for students it made up for it by affordable fees and the bus service. During every meeting or other public event, the officials always took pride in pointing out affordable education that it provided to national and international students and the bus service that enabled the students to comfortably reach the campus.

When the institution accommodated the new working title of a university, there was neither the land nor any plan to start any hostel facilities for the staff and students. As a quick fix, administration happily invested in more buses than in infrastructure development. This situation amplified the importance of the transport system and resulted in the transport system being most funded, and consequently more power than any other function.

Ana Powell

Couple of years ago Ana Powell was working at mid management position in a private bank when she switched to this public sector university. On the day she resigned, the regional bank manager advised her to think

carefully about the decision as Ana Powell was due for another promotion this year. That would have been her second promotion in a short span of three years. After a short conversation highlighting the monetary rewards, training opportunities, and of course career advancement in the financial sector, the manager gave her two days to reconsider her decision.

Even though the university was 200 miles away from her home town, she decided to join the academia. During the job interview she made it clear that her primary motive was to work in academia so that she can have a chance to pursue doctoral studies. She was told that her main responsibility would be to plan and start a new department for Administrative Studies. She would be reporting to the Dean of Information Technology and Administrative Studies who had a PhD in a foreign language from abroad.

During her first week in the university she had meetings with the dean, various directors and vice chancellor of the university. The vice chancellor assured her that she would be given autonomy and required resources to complete the project. At that time this university had no department or course offered in administrative sciences, it worked on an annual system of examination and it was only eight months since this institution of learning was granted a charter as a degree awarding university.

She quickly found out that there were some givens with this job such as working hours. The institution had always followed uniform class timings for classes from 8.00 a.m. to 1.30 p.m. In the typical public sector set up, communication has to be along the set channels that lacked efficiency and entailed usual bureaucratic hurdles. As a result, there was ineffective use of communication channels with very poor verbal information exchange within the organization. High emphasis was placed on the written memos that gave large room for lengthy remarks and the usual responses that consumed a great deal of time. Any request or proposal must be in written form following typical old fashioned formatting style. This hard copy moved from desk to desk with necessary comments and delays that reflect the importance of the official in the hierarchy (Hull, [2012](#)). Even though, necessary computer hardware and internet facility were available, emails were never used to speed up the process. As a result an official usually dictated his memo to a typist who then typed a draft for approval and after necessary corrections the memo was send by a messenger for distribution. Until now there had been no significant need for fast efficient channels of communication that was a prerequisite of modern organizational set up.

All plans and requests were processed after going through due process with every decision, whether big or small had to have the approval of the “competent authority”. That left no room for timely addressing the problems that were associated with starting a new project. Years of attracting students without any particular effort and the fact that it offered unique courses had resulted in a very complacent mindset. University administration felt quite confident in its working and the level of facilities it provided. As a public bureaucracy its work was deeply rooted in hierarchy, procedure, control and regulation which are the basic principles of the Weberian bureaucratic model (Byrkjeflot, [2018](#); Ferreira & Serpa, [2019](#)). Strict adherence to these principles had shaped the character of this university since inception. Hence, it excelled at maintaining hierarchical and rigid procedures to ensure a stable environment.

The boldest step since its inception was to allow the establishment of two new departments in this bureaucratic setting. In this context, even though latest computers systems with printers were purchased and promptly placed in every office for “display purposes”. All the directives and communication were still being printed on “reliable type writers”. There also seemed to be a general lack of understanding about the working and requirements of Arts Education and professional degree studies of Administrative Sciences.

As was the norm, largest portion of funds were directed towards the purchase of more new buses with the intent of starting more routes that covered distant localities. The Director of Transport fully realized and exploited the importance of transport operations and pushed his weighed almost in all academic and non-academic matters. Similarly, the drivers of buses had a hold on the affairs of the university. They showed their power with delays in the service giving reasons ranging from breakdowns to traffic blocks.

As the pride of the university, its transport system included new and spacious buses. New buses were regularly added to the fleet. University buses provided pick and drop service strictly in accordance with university timings. In mornings, students were picked for the start of classes. The first bus left campus at 6.00 a.m. to cover the farthest pick up point. Interestingly, no bus service was provided during the class hours. At the end of classes bus service was resumed and the last bus returned to campus after dropping students around 4.00 p.m.

Unfortunately, other transportation options were limited or very expensive for students. In addition, as a small town it did not offer any public transport system.

The Situation

There were few more weeks before the end of first semester, however, it had brought satisfaction of reaching upto this point accompanied by some severe concerns. For starters, the examination and academics had shifted all the responsibilities for examinations and result preparation to the administrative sciences due to their unfamiliarity with the GPA based semester system. Ana Powell had been able to conduct the midterm examinations and result preparations with extra efforts from her team. No additional payments were made for this work. Later the team members had demanded that they should be paid for any such efforts in future. Furthermore, two of her team members informed her that they would be resigning at the end of this semester to join another university at higher salary package.

More important was the fact that even though the program stated with very modest number of students, the learning environment of administrative sciences has attracted enormous response from the market. Majority of the enquiries were from the working professionals who expressed interested in evening classes. To be sure, Ana Powell conducted a survey that proved the demand for evening classes in administrative sciences.

She discussed the results of her survey with the dean, who was very pleased but politely mentioned that she should talk with other directors and only then develop any plan for expanding the program. With this advice in mind, she had meetings with other directors. Their responses ranged from what is in it for us to do not be over anxious for performance. Director Academics pointed to the massive paper work required for necessary approvals to start something new, Director Examination was already overwhelmed with the examination burden, and most importantly Director Transport could not even think how to talk to bus drivers to provide service for those odd evening hours. This attitude astonished her, but she was not discouraged and decided to test the waters with written request. One after the other, two of her requests for meeting to discuss the course of action for next semester got lost in the bureaucratic labyrinth (Meier et al., [2001](#)).

Ana Powell was deep in thought after her meeting with the administration manager of Public Works Organization (PWO), a public sector organization. He had requested a meeting to explore the possibilities of sending six assistant managers from PWO for evening graduate program. This was another sign that the reputation of administrative sciences programs was attracting individuals as well as organizations. As Ana Powell was thinking of ways to accommodate the demand for evening program, the office messenger handed her a typed memo for annual planning meeting next week. The vice chancellor called these meetings to discuss present situation and academic activities for the next session.

Ana Powell realized that this could be her chance to get immediate action on the issues concerning the new department, but how should she proceed? Her plan must include the salary package for her team, distribution of work load, limitations imposed by rigid working hours in the light of increase in course demand, and most importantly the additional resources for the evening session with the transportation as the central point.

While thinking about the upcoming meeting, Ana Powell again remembered what one of her teachers used to say about public sector, he always referred to public sector as a sleeping giant.....capable of so much but wasting all of its potential in a state of inactive lethargy. Comparing public sector and private sector he would always add that once awake the public sector giant is unstoppable and can perform wonders due to its unique powers and resources. Now Ana Powell was wondering whether her giant would ever wake up and what does she need to do to break its deep slumber?

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