

Public Management Report

An occasional (and maybe insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities in leadership, governance, management, and performance in public agencies.

On the tyranny of:

Bureaucratic Routines

"May I see your driver's license, please?" The request was routine. I was buying some beer, the bar code scanner had set off a small beep, and the supermarket check-out clerk needed to see proof of my age.

One look at my face might have suggested that I am older than 21. Indeed, given my white beard (see picture), one look might have suggested that I am over 30. That is the age on those signs that say: "If you look younger than 30, we will ask for your I.D."

Still, the check-out clerk—who had been carded many times (if, that is, he owned an I.D. certifying he was 21)—was all business. He wanted to see my license.

Meanwhile, I and the man who was bagging my groceries (and who was much closer to my age than to the clerk's) kibitzed over this ludicrous routine. The clerk, however, was undeterred. When I produced my driver's license, he read it carefully—very carefully.

Then, and only then, did he let me buy my beer—my non-alcoholic beer.

That is not a typo. A young supermarket clerk carded a certifiably old guy who was buying non-alcoholic beer.

I and the man bagging groceries found this highly amusing. Nevertheless, while we openly

joked about the absurdity of this process, the clerk stuck seriously to his required routine.

Why? Why did the clerk not just look at my face—or at the beer—and simply hit the OK button? Why did he not exercise some intelligent discretion? Check-out clerks have been doing that with me for decades.

One explanation is that the clerk was young. He was inexperienced. He did not notice that I looked older than his father. He did not know that he could exercise discretion.

In fact, however, I think that the clerk was quite experienced. He behaved the way he did—he refused to exercise discretion despite the ridicule he was receiving—precisely because he had learned how the world works. The clerk had learned the costs and benefits of bureaucratic routines—the *personal* costs and benefits of following and not following them.

On the benefit side, there was no personal gain to following or not following the routine. Either way, he would continue to stand in front of the scanner, slide items over it, and collect the required payment. If he ignored the rule and exercised discretion, his line might move a little faster, in which case he would get a few more customers. If he followed the routine, his line might move a little slower, and some customers might shift to other lines.



Either way, he would continue to stand in front of the scanner until his shift was over.

On the cost side, however, there was a big difference. It cost the clerk nothing to ask me to show a driver's license. But, if he failed to check my I.D., and, if (for some miracle of reverse cosmetic surgery) I was much younger than I looked, the clerk might get in trouble.

The probability of this happening was quite small. Still, the clerk judged this probability to be greater than zero. Moreover, he had learned—perhaps from the supermarket's training program; perhaps from experienced clerks who had explained how the world works—that failing to check an I.D. could result in serious costs.

The clerk refused to exercise discretion precisely because he had learned the value of following administrative routines. With little experience in large organizations, this young clerk had still learned one of the fundamental rules of bureaucratic life: "If you follow all of the prescribed rules, you can't get in trouble." Thus, when the scanner beeped at some non-alcoholic beer, this worldly youth knew exactly what was in his best interest to do.

To me, the experience was merely humorous. I wasn't embarrassed. I did not need to go to another line to have my driver's license checked by a government I.D. inspector. I did not need to fill out the official beer-buying form. I did not need to come back with my birth certificate to prove that I was 21. I waited a few extra seconds, and I still got my beer.

Nevertheless, this encounter illustrates the challenge of making public agencies more citizen friendly. Ordinary humans easily comprehend the personal costs and benefits of following bureaucratic routines. They just as easily become desensitized to the inanity of mindlessly following such routines.

Government does not have a monopoly on this problem. Any business that creates administrative procedures—and then creates a set of personal costs and benefits that focuses people's attention on the very large, if low-probability punishment for failing to follow the required routines—has this problem.

Still, the leaders of public agencies, for which the sanctity of the routines is well established in both formal rules and informal traditions, face a serious challenge: How can they convince front-line workers to use their own, intelligent, discerning, citizen-friendly judgment?

While I and the man bagging my groceries openly joked about the absurdity of the process, the supermarket clerk stuck firmly to his required routine. He carded a certifiably old guy for buying non-alcoholic beer.

As always, there is no single, universally effective strategy, only a collection of helpful tactics. Here's one: Whenever a front-line worker seeks to help a citizen by exercising discretion in a responsible if (in retrospect) errant manner, the agency's leaders need to rally in support.

They cannot let the individual be punished by an army of accountability holders. They need to defend, indeed praise, this individual for striving to help a citizen.

If they fail to do so, if they let this employee be disciplined, everyone else in the agency will have relearned that important lesson of bureaucratic life: You have to card every citizen for every six-pack of non-alcoholic beer. **B**

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