

Let's Not Ask the Committee

A popular fallacy holds that to do a job you appoint a committee of experts and hire an administrator. The experts, who don't have time to do the job, contribute their knowledge. The administrator, who doesn't have the knowledge, contributes his time. With this simple formula US physics devises programs, outlines courses, writes and publishes books and journals, distributes funds and makes self-assessments.

Every good system has its flaw though, and the fault in this one is that it doesn't work. Experts who don't have time to carry out a project don't have time to get deeply involved in it. Moreover, if one of them did, he would find himself in conflict with another committeeman or the administrator, who would have different ideas. Bland advice makes no waves and doesn't upset the project. Meanwhile the administrator is doing his best, but with inadequate knowledge and inexperience the best is not good.

The committee error, as we see it, is a symptom of a complicated syndrome: substitution of impersonal and intangible products of the group for the individual. Instead of developing scientists, our society is advancing science. In place of the devoted teacher it has substituted the effective course. In place of the well informed man it has an information system. In place of the man of fire and determination it has the quiet cool of advisory boards.

Perhaps the cause is overapplication of a good thing, democracy, based on a misconception. Often one seeks a majority opinion as an excuse for failing to develop one's own. But the best democracy is made up of independent, free thinking individuals, not a mass of conformers all of whom think alike. As Gilbert and Sullivan phrased it, "When everyone is somebody, then no one's anybody." Applying the criterion to physics we

remember that the great things were done by Newton, Helmholtz, Einstein—not by teams of coworkers labeled "et al"—and the pattern is likely to apply in the future.

A related symptom, a secondary effect, is displacement of the expert by the administrator, who has gradually advanced from administrative assistant to contract administrator to vice president for administration. He signs the checks at the front desk while his predecessor, that genial physicist of humor and feeling who used to run the laboratory, has been sent back to his bench as an old fuddy-duddy who wouldn't know a government contract if a salesman gave him one.

If the diagnosis is accurate, a cure suggests itself. Let us test our policy decisions against what they do for the individual. Do they inspire him as a child, interest him as a student, give him opportunities in graduate school and meet his needs as a mature physicist? When a paper is to be published, can we ask, "Does he need it?" "Will it help him?" instead of, "Is the material correct?" "Does it meet the standards defined by our committee?" When an experiment is to be approved, can we ask, "What will he learn from it?" instead of "What will it do for our nation's science?" and "Who will support it?"

History offers us demonstrations that a society in which the individual can flower, no matter how different he is, need not worry about the state of its science. The well developed individual will find his information in a dusty library and perform his experiment with string and sealing wax. History offers us examples, too, of what happens when the individual is sacrificed to the system and administrators take over the functions of the persons they should serve. The question before us is, Are we about to repeat the examples for lack of ability to learn from them?

—R. Hobart Ellis Jr.