

THE CULTURE OF BUREAUCRACY:

Nothing Fails Like Success

by Eric Lax

As a governmental technique, the model program is doomed from the start. For one thing, it must show results by a specified time. The model may be granted a temporary extension, but must ultimately face an up-or-down judgment. This contradicts the good sense of any self-respecting agency, which lives on perpetual expectations. For another thing, model programs always attract adverse publicity because they are limited attacks on widespread problems.

Nonetheless, once in a while you find a model that is a genuine success. Take the job training program for convicts on Rikers Island in New York. After three years of federal seed money, the training center was thriving, and its record was so exemplary that everybody wanted to adopt it. Several agencies across the federal, state, and local spectrum clamored for the Rikers center. The shops and tools and teachers were already operating and ready to continue. It was only a matter of continuing the money, and choosing the victorious sponsor.

The Rikers program may merit only one line on somebody's budget, but it is a good example of what happens to a successful experiment once it loses the privileged status of being a model and has to stand in line with the rest. The fate of the training center may not be enough to prove a bureaucratic law, but it should help any model program manager avoid the perils of unmitigated success.

Rikers Island is a dot of land
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surrounded by barbed wire that practically adjoins the runway at New York City's LaGuardia Airport. On Rikers are housed the inmates of the New York City Reformatory, the Adolescent Remand Shelter, the New York City Correctional Institution for Women, and the New York City Correctional Institution for Men. There are about 5,000 men and women incarcerated on the island. About 2,000 of them, of which approximately 90 per cent are Puerto Rican or Black, have been there for as long as a year, awaiting trial because they could not raise bail money. The remaining 3,000 are serving sentences of up to five years in cramped, overcrowded cells and dormitories (two people in a six-by-eight-foot cell, for instance).

Because Rikers Island is a reformatory and correctional institution, we should expect that there should be a lot of reforming and correcting going on. There isn't. What there is a lot of, according to one guard, is "enforced idleness instead of rehabilitation." Inmates have nothing to do but march from one area to another, wait to be marched somewhere else, and stare at those bits of wall that aren't lined with other inmates. This may provide some inkling as to why they riot now and again, as they did in August, 1970. Because they have unlimited time to talk with each other about their criminal specialties, Rikers inmates become (or, rather, think they become, judging from the high recidivism rate) better car thieves,

better robbers, and better muggers by the time they leave.

In October, 1965, in an effort to provide rehabilitative training for at least a few of the convicted male inmates (there are no programs for those awaiting trial), the Departments of Labor and HEW funded a pilot Manpower Development Training (MDT) program at Rikers to be administered through the New York City Board of Education. A \$2.3-million classroom and shop facility was built and stocked with machinery. In the following three years, 1,200 inmates, most of them adolescents, were given basic education courses and trained in such skills as printing, woodworking, machine shop, furniture-finishing and repair, and metalworking—the job areas most open according to the New York State Employment Service. Programs concluded coincidentally with trainees' release dates, and once they were free, all trainees were able to take up jobs, often for the first time in their lives.

In an attempt to evaluate the Rikers program, Benjamin Malcolm, Deputy Commissioner of Corrections for New York City, wrote his master's thesis on it for New York University. Part of his thesis was a study of recidivism among a group of MDT trainees and a group of regular inmates. Although there are no definite figures available for the reconviction rate of all ex-Rikers inmates, or for those at other prisons, Malcom's study showed that the recidivism rate for MDT graduates was only one-third as high as that for regular inmates.

Searching for Sugar Daddy

On August 22, 1969, the funding authorization for the model MDT program expired, and the facility was closed. But because the program's record was outstanding, and because a request for additional funds had been submitted, there was every expectation of reopening it within a month.

Eight months passed, and nothing happened. Evidently, any concern felt

by the Board of Education over the delay in funding the program was at best half-hearted. They apparently made little or no effort to find out what was causing the holdup, and since the money was not immediately forthcoming, the program staff was assigned to other schools.

Continued funding often becomes a bigger problem with models than with regular programs. Much like a Peace Corps volunteer, the federal government is supposed to support its models only until the locals can run them and fund them. The early assurance of support on the part of the locals, however, is often superseded by a nostalgia for the federal benefits, and a search for some way to get them back. Cities and states tend to view models as short-term gifts with the potential of being long-term gifts. Once the original grant is given, nobody can abandon the idea that somehow the big donor will come through for more. Thus, in the Rikers case, to get the money the agencies first had to convince Washington that they were healthy enough to someday take over the program. For the second installment, however, they had to evidence enough helplessness to justify more of the same. None thought that they should pay.

Notwithstanding the money problems, in April, 1970, in what can only be called a flash of optimism, the Board of Education appointed Mrs. Alice Reed to be teacher-in-charge for the new program, then expected to begin in June. Mrs. Reed—a very competent and determined lady who is a trained social worker and experienced teacher—was also involved with the first programs. When the money did not arrive, Mrs. Reed set out to discover both why her program was not yet going and what it would take to get it going. What it took was 23 months. (It should be pointed out that although Mrs. Reed had the title of teacher-in-charge, she was not paid for that position until the program began. Her real job was as coordinator of the Concentrated Employment

Project in East and Central Harlem and South Bronx. All her effort on behalf of the MDT program was strictly a matter of her own time and money.)

She first learned that because the first New York MDT programs had been such successes there were several agencies that wanted to administer subsequent ones. Among them were the Board of Education, which submitted the proposal for the program Mrs. Reed was to head, the New York City Department of Corrections, several private trade schools, the New York State Employment Service, and a private organization which administers federal grants through a program called Group Relations Ongoing Workshops, Inc. (GROW). She also learned that every proposal has an identification number while it is processed through the various agencies. According to the Board of Education, the number for their Rikers Proposal was MT1-5157. All she had to do was follow her number to the money.

Chasing MT1-5157

Armed with this information, Mrs. Reed called several people whom she thought would either know, or be in a position to find out, what had become of the Board's proposal. Each of them did, in fact, tell her what the status was of proposal of MT1-5157. Unfortunately, each gave her a different answer.

Her first call was to the office of Senator Jacob Javits. One of his aides checked and reported that the proposal had passed through the New York State Education Office, Manpower Division, and had been forwarded with a low-priority rating to the New York Employment Service. Before Mrs. Reed could express surprise at the low-priority rating, the aide told her that according to his information, proposal MT1-5157 was GROW's and not the Board's. Mrs. Reed called the assistant director of the New York City MDT office to check on the number of her proposal.

It was, he assured her, MT1-5157. She then called the director of the fiscal office at the Board. He told her the same thing, adding that the program had been budgeted for \$399,000 for 360 inmates for 44 weeks. The next call was to someone else in the New York City MDT office, who told her that proposal MT1-5157 had been submitted for MDT in conjunction with GROW, but that the two had different proposal numbers, and that the MDT program would follow the GROW program, with a budget of \$367,000, not \$399,000. All that didn't really matter anyway, since he added that the proposal had been rejected by HEW and Labor and was undergoing revision. With the revision, came a new identification number, MT17148-7153. It is unclear whether anyone except the phantom who numbers things was aware of the change.

A few weeks after this incident, Mrs. Reed still had made no progress, and the inmates rioted. Congressman Biaggi visited Rikers and was quoted as being "shocked" to find the training facility closed. (Before running for Congress, Biaggi was a police detective lieutenant and was once Policeman of the Year, he still has an active interest in the rehabilitation of convicts.) Mrs. Reed immediately called him, and his staff began their own investigation.

Shortly after she called Biaggi, an aide to Governor Rockefeller told Mrs. Reed that, according to a letter he had from the New York State Employment Service, proposal MT1-5157 was truly from GROW, not MDT. But the people at the City Board of Education, being educators and therefore of the conviction that numbers are absolute, were not to be dissuaded and stoutly maintained that MT1-5157 was, and always would be, their number.

Soon after that, Javit's office called with the news that the New York State Employment Service had rejected the MDT proposal and that the GROW proposal had been rejected in Washington because 1) it was too

expensive and 2) the New York City Department of Corrections had not approved it.

Biaggi's office also tried to trace the budget cuts, but made no progress. Finally, on December 15, 1970, he telegraphed Secretary of Labor James Hodgson, urging immediate approval of the Board of Education's Rikers MDT proposal. On December 17, a letter signed by Biaggi and 17 other New York City Congressmen was sent to Hodgson urging his support. On January 12, 1971, Hodgson wrote to Biaggi and said that the proposal would not be approved because of insufficient funds.

Bobbling the Buck

Biaggi then did a very clever thing. He called Hodgson's office and asked for an appointment for the entire New York City delegation to meet with him regarding the Rikers program. Rather than have a congressional sit-in, Hodgson suddenly allowed that he could release \$100,000 immediately and an additional \$100,000 in July.

In mid-April, 1971, however, 20 months after the facility was closed, and almost a year after the new program was to have begun, the funds still had not been released. This prompted a telegram from Biaggi to Hodgson, saying, "It certainly appears that your department is trying to frustrate this project for fiscal 1971." Two weeks later, Hodgson advised Biaggi that the funds would be released within two weeks.

In fact, on May 3 they were forwarded to the New York State Vocational Office in Albany, where they were promptly "administratively lost." A call from Biaggi on May 26 to see what had happened to them produced a two-day flurry of activity culminating in the funds' discovery. On May 28, the Rikers Island Manpower Development Training Program was almost funded for \$258,932. It turned out, however, that the print shop appropriation was deleted in Washington but the funds to staff it

remained intact. Instead of letting Mrs. Reed try to apply the money to approved sections of the program, the State of New York demanded that the authorization be returned to Washington so the proper cuts could be made. This, mind you, is the same New York State that constantly complains of near-bankruptcy and cries for additional revenue sharing.

Finally, Alice Reed and her 11 teachers and counselors were able to begin their program at the end of July with a budget of \$213,000. Their efforts were impaired by the fact that the shop machines, being federal property, and therefore unusable without proper authorization, had been sitting as idle as the Rikers inmates for two years. Many of the machines were rusty and unusable, but only \$1,000 was allotted for machine repair.

Now, 78 inmates are receiving basic education classes, as well as training in wood shop, metal fabrication, or machine shop. Such items as a \$35,000 offset camera are going unused because, among others, the print shop was not refunded, and more than a third of the classrooms and shops are not being used because there is no money to staff them. Because the typing classes were not refunded, Mrs. Reed spent \$350 of her own money to buy a self-teaching typing course.

Mrs. Reed is already pushing to get the program funded for next year, but after all this, who knows? What can you say about a model program that was just that, and then for two years was nonexistent? The ironic thing is that about halfway through her bureaucratic ordeal, Mrs. Reed was talking with one of Javits' staff. What would have happened, she asked, if we had lied about our success and shown that the model program had actually failed in many ways? "Well," the man replied ruefully, "since model programs remain model programs until they work well, you would have been told to change a few things around, to try harder, and then been refunded for another three years."■