The Teacher

(In which Socrates Explains the Case Method of Teaching Public Administration, and Almost Becomes an Administrator Himself in the Process)

by John D. Montgomery

(Twenty-five years ago in the United States the case approach to administrative behavior was introduced. Its principal characteristic was the profound examination of a single administrative decision or action, whether important or minor, and its principal value was in giving the students who used it a sense of participating in an actual administrative operation. The method was new, but its roots stretched twenty-five hundred years, to Socrates and his successors Plato and Aristotle.

Here is how Socrates might have introduced the method to his Athenian friends if he had happened to think it necessary to supplement the education of philosopher-kings with a little practical work in public administration:)

Socrates: That was indeed an eloquent speech of Protagoras; yet I am not sure that I have learned from him.

Glauccon, a student: But is not Protagoras our most famous teacher of administration? Has he not written the most useful formulas for the organization of men? And are not his principles the most acclaimed of all the teachings of our learned men?

Soc.: That is true, and I may be at fault for not knowing how to master his principles and put them to good use.

Glau.: You would be the last man I should accuse of stupidity, Socrates.

Soc.: So indeed I am.

Gl.: But what could be simpler than his advice regarding span of control, or the scalar principle; or his teachings about the division between line and staff?

Soc.: Simplicity is indeed a virtue.

Gl.: I know what you are going to say, Socrates, and I will anticipate: that the truth is a greater virtue than simplicity.

Soc.: Will you then go further and tell me how we can learn the truth about the public administration?
Gl.: I have heard you too often not to have an answer to this question: you learn it by observing the works of good and bad administrators, and by deriving general principles which can withstand the criticism of thoughtful men.

Soc.: You have learned my simple wisdom very well.

Gl.: Now you are taunting me, Socrates. Do you not agree that Protagoras' principles are reasonable as well as simple?

Soc.: They are impressive when he teaches them.

Gl.: Your words are words of praise, but in your mouth they have a critical sound.

Soc.: Then I must speak further, so that you will not think me jealous of Protagoras, or that I do not prize his wisdom and eloquence.

For I know that his lecture was a model of organization and presentation, and that what he has said is commonly thought about the sciences and arts of administration. And yet, as you have suggested, I am dissatisfied. For what have we learned from Protagoras? How will you prove these principles? Which of his students shall we rate the highest?

Gl.: Here are many questions, Socrates, but I shall try to answer them honestly. First, we have learned the rules of administration. Second, we shall prove them as we apply them in our public careers. Third, we must finally rate highest the man who has achieved the greatest success as an administrator; and in the meantime we shall give the best grades to those students who have best learned the rules of administration.

Soc.: And how shall we be assured that those of his hearers who have learned the rules can best apply them? I see that this question displeases you; so let me ask another. How do we know that the rules themselves are wise?

Gl.: But this is administration itself: the rules agreed upon by wise men and preserved by the traditions of scholarship and inquiry. These rules are the alphabet of the language of administration.

Soc.: And does knowledge of the alphabet make a great poet?

Student: No, but there are no poets who are ignorant of the alphabet.
Soc.: Is this knowledge a part of poetry, or does it rather enable the poet to communicate his works to those who cannot hear him speak?

Gl.: We are straying, Socrates. Surely you are not proposing that an administrator should not trouble to learn the rules of administration.

Soc.: That is true. Just as the teachers of the alphabet are useful in society, so are those who explain to us the rules of administration. Yet the poet does not think of the alphabet at all as he works. Is not the administrator as well too busy to worry about the precepts of Protagoras? But I see you do not need to answer this question, for here comes Iphicrates, who has spent his life in the service of the state, and who can therefore answer these troublesome questions better than either you or I. Iphicrates, can you stop and talk with us a few minutes?

Iphicrates: I will gladly talk, and still more gladly listen; but as I am nearly late for my next appointment, I must ask you to walk along with me while we converse.

Soc.: This is still better, Iphicrates, for we can in this way learn your principles of administration while you are at work.

Iph.: I have no principles except to be on time.

Gl.: Is this the only advice you can give to me in preparing myself for the public service?

Iph.: The only way to prepare for the public service is to work for the state. I myself have served that master since I was conscripted into the army 30 years ago, and there is no teacher - not even Socrates - who can equal experience as a source of wisdom and knowledge.

Soc.: Least of all, Socrates, I should have said; and Socrates would be the last to deny the pre-eminence of experience as a teacher of men. But not all men can have the richness of experience that you have enjoyed, Iphicrates; and fewer still can learn as much from it. Shall we not work to the end that Glaucon and others may learn from your experience, and from your ability to convert each experience into knowledge?

Gl.: Socrates is in danger of contradicting himself now, for he is asking you, Iphicrates, to develop principles of knowledge that I may learn; but a few moments ago he told me that principles were of little practical use to an administrator.
Iph.: I cannot formulate general principles, in any case, for I am a practical man rather than a follower of theories of government.

Soc.: Before I allow myself to become inconsistent, I must ask another question.

Iph.: You will learn, Glaucon, that Socrates never contradicts himself, for he never commits himself to anything, but only asks questions so that those who answer may be guilty of contradiction rather than he.

Soc.: It is true that I am more interested in asking questions than in hearing answers too readily given; and yet I have committed myself today by saying that I do not think the teaching of rules and principles of administration is a sufficient means of training men for the public service. Do you agree, Iphicrates?

Iph.: I do. And yet I confess myself discomfited by Glaucon's question, and yours, Socrates. Must all men wait until experience has ripened them into good administrators? Must the state suffer the errors of its apprentices while men are adding to their own private wisdom at the public expense?

Soc.: Is that how you learned your art, Iphicrates?

Iph.: Indeed it is, Socrates, for nobody made more mistakes than I in those early years when I first had charge of the work of other men, of even less experience.

Soc.: Did you learn from errors only, or did your wise decisions also furnish the basis for further action? Cannot men learn from their successes as well as their failures?

Iph.: I think adversity is the better teacher.

Soc.: You are saying, are you not, that one can surely learn from experience only those things which he should not do, and must use his imagination to find some other solution to similar problems in the future? If this is so, then how is anything well administered except by accident? Must all administrators proceed solely by using their imagination to avoid the errors of the past? Is there no virtue in the past which can be brought into the present and the future?

Iph.: I cannot think this is right, Socrates; but I have no time to answer you further, for we are already at my office door, and I see that I am just in time for my appointment.

Gl.: I am not satisfied with our progress, Socrates.
Soc.: Nor am I. Iphicrates, before you go you must answer one more question.

Iph.: Please make it a practical one, then, Socrates, for my mind does not work by abstractions and fine distinctions.

Soc.: It is this: do you think that if Glaucon went with you and observed your day's work he could learn how you have proceeded in finding the solution to the problems of this day? For I know that each day at your office you are compelled to resolve questions of some public importance.

Iph.: I must confess that I do not see how my own processes of making decisions can instruct another.

Soc.: Can he not learn from your present wisdom how you avoid the mistakes of your own past? In this instance I shall suggest that Glaucon talk not with you alone, but with others with whom you will work in resolving this question, and with those whom it will affect and those who have an interest in its outcome. When he has learned from all these sources what your problem really means, perhaps he (and I, if he will tell me all he has learned) can know as much about the problem as you do.

Iph.: More, I should think, because I cannot take the time to see everybody who will be affected by the decision I must make today. In fact, in this case I doubt if even he can consult all the interested parties, for I am working on the interpretation of a tax law, and every citizen in Athens will be affected by what I decide.

Soc.: In that case, can we not invite Cepalus and Polemarcus to look into this matter as well, so that we may have as much information about it as possible?

Iph.: But I do not see how this can be of any practical use, for by the time you have finished your study the decision will already have been made. My action cannot wait until you have organized your question-and-answer parties into an interview schedule and finally written up a case history of this question.

Soc.: That is true; but if we have learned what you know now, and can find out what else can be known today, can we not also determine how adequate was the information upon which you had to act? And can we not speculate upon the additional or alternative means that could have been employed in reaching a wise decision? Can we not thus see how the rules or common sense of administration can be applied in similar future cases?
Iph.: You are going, then, to attempt to recreate the circumstances of this day's decision so that it may be better understood by others and by myself?

Soc.: If you have no objection.

Iph.: But even if you succeed in reproducing the immediacy of one of my experiences today, how will this help Glaucon become a successful administrator? Would it not be wiser to assign him as my assistant, not only to observe, but also to assist me in my administrative operations, and thus gain practical experience as an administrator?

Soc.: What kinds of practical work experience could you assign to Glaucon? He has already had instruction in the law and in administrative organization, and has some understanding of the economy of the artisans' shop and of the market place. I can testify to his love of learning and his readiness to absorb the wisdom of his teachers. Does he qualify for service as a professional assistant? And if he does, how will this improve his administrative skill?

Iph.: He can handle my routine affairs and learn how the working of my office is organized so as to reduce the need for constant personal attention to mechanical details. This should be helpful to any administrator, for one of his most important problems is to free himself from details so that he can devote his attention to policies.

Gl.: I agree that this kind of experience would be helpful, but would repeated participation in mechanical administrative operations help me develop an understanding of the more important problems of administrative judgment? I need to know the work of clerks and messengers, but how will this knowledge teach me the subtleties of supervision and leadership? For I am beginning to agree with Socrates and with you, Iphicrates, that knowledge of principles and rules will not be sufficient.

Iph.: I am already late for my appointment. But before I go, let me propose a compromise: if you will put Glaucon at my disposal for several weeks so that he may gain the necessary administrative background of my work, at the end of that time I will explain the tax decision I am about to make and give him an opportunity thoroughly the reasons for it. What do you say, Socrates?

Soc.: It is for Glaucon to agree, for it is his time that we are about to commit, and his career, and those of his fellow students, that we hope to advance.
Gl.: Of course I agree. I shall return in an hour to learn my new duties if you will be ready for me.

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Soc.: And now that we are in the market place, let us seek out Cepalus and Polemarcus, and inquire if they would be interested in our proposal.

Cepalus, will you join with Glaucon and me in testing some of the administrative principles we heard Protagoras describe so eloquently this morning?

Cepalus: Good day, Socrates, and you, Glaucon. I do not understand your purpose. Does the obvious need testing?

Soc.: The commonplaces should be examined first of all, since we depend so much on them. And should not this be true especially of the affairs of state, which are so unpredictable, and are yet the most important of men's concerns? We have been discussing the training of public administrators, and have agreed that the application of general principles is as important as the principles themselves, yet is often neglected in the discourses on the subject. Iphicrates has just told us that experience is the only way of learning how the general should be applied to the specific, and Glaucon and he have agreed to examine intensively the background of a single important decision he is to make today, so that we can learn from this experience how other similar decisions can best be reached.

Cep.: This seems a promising venture, but I do not see how I can help.

Gl.: Socrates thinks that while I study Iphicrates' point of view in this case, you can be learning about the same decision from others who participate in it or are interested in its outcome.

Soc.: That is what I propose, if you are willing, Cepalus. And when you and others have finished your studies, we shall gather together to prepare a single history of the case, with all the relevant facts introduced, so that those who come after us may also benefit from our efforts.

Cep.: This seems very accommodating of you, but will not Protagoras and the other lecturers be forced to abandon their labors if the case method proves a successful means of teaching the art of administration?
Soc.: Say rather that their work will become the more effective, for experience enriches theory and the exposition of principles; it does not displace it.

Gl.: Does not even Iphicrates, who says that he has learned by experience alone, hope himself to gain still more knowledge from our efforts? For through them he can test the adequacy of his own "information system."

Cep.: This language of yours is more suited to the analyses of a technician or an efficiency expert than to the modest dimensions of our case inquiry. Are we, then, to undertake administrative measurements, to plot efficiency scales, to trace processes and flows on charts and graphs?

Soc.: Certainly we shall use all methods of analysis that are appropriate to our inquiry. For our work is still too humble to scorn the offerings of those who have designed exact measurements of administrative performance. Our task is to press more deeply into the process of administration than the general principles can reach, and to do this we shall need the resources and the experiences of all the students of government.

Gl.: Well, good day to you again, Iphicrates, and how is that you are with us again so soon after your appointment?

Iph.: I finished early, and came to inquire whether Socrates has really tricked you all -- and himself, too -- into joining in this case study. For you know, this will be the first time that Socrates will have trapped himself into doing something instead of just talking about it.

Soc.: That is so, my dear Iphicrates. But I have this one consolation: that if we do our work well, there will be more talking done about it than you or I could do in a lifetime. And my work, and that of others to follow, will be simply to raise questions and to guide those who would answer, by posing further questions. So you see, Socrates will win after all, for his questions will help others find answers.

(We may be reliably reassured that this conversation never took place, and that this project was never undertaken. But similar occurrences in Saigon during the last quarter of 1957 can now be reported and if any of my readers would like to learn how the resulting project is faring today, they are invited to call at the National Institute of Administration and ask a few Socratic questions.)