

Nowlan's Rule

'That government departments are run for the benefit of the department and the bureaucrats who work within it and never, ever for the benefit of the public'

Throughout my legal career, and indeed in life generally, I have met many people who are angry with government agencies. They complain about delays, red tape and that the agency is casting the administrative burden onto them. They have an unreasonable expectation that government should be assisting them rather than hindering them. I pacify them by explaining to them Nowlan's Rule.

The Rule

Nowlan's Rule is that government departments are run for the benefit of the government and never ever for the benefit of the public. When a conflict arises between the bureaucracy and the customer, it will always be determined in the manner that suits the bureaucracy and never the customer. This is why every area of government is casting a never-ending administrative burden onto the customer.

Why is this happening?

Firstly, lack of competition. Government is a monopoly. If you suffered poor service at a restaurant, you would take your business elsewhere. You cannot do that with the tax office, the police or the local council. When you take a ticket at Service NSW, you are at their mercy. They can treat you as well or as poorly as they choose. You have no option but to suffer it. Go ahead and write a complaint letter. Nothing will happen.

Part of acting in the interest of the department is acting in the interest of the people who work in the department. If they can find a way to make life easier for themselves, they will. If they can shift the administrative burden onto you, they will. And they do. After all, public servants have a union to advance their interest, customers do not.

Examples

Why don't schools start at 8am so that parents can drop the kids at school and get to work by 9am? Because, while parents would love it, teachers would hate it. Nowlan's rule holds that school are run for the benefit of the institution and the teachers who work there rather than the students or the parents.

I have suffered the misfortune of studying at Australia's largest medical school. At this school they have adopted a model called Problem Based Learning (PBL). A more accurate name would be 'Teach Yourself Medicine'. This model involves the school providing textbooks and computers and telling the students to divide into groups and teach each other.

This is in contrast to didactic teaching which involves a teacher, who knows what they are talking about, explaining concepts to the class and answering questions. PBL is despised by students and leads to terrible results. So, why are schools all over the world adopting it? Because it is easier for the teachers.

Teaching is the easiest job in the world if you don't have to do any actual teaching. Nowlan's rule posits that whenever a school has to choose between option A, which benefits students, and option B, which makes life easier for their staff, they will choose option B.

Conclusion

People feel much better about bureaucracy once they get their head around this concept. It doesn't resolve their difficulties, but they feel better for knowing why so many areas of government are so painful. So, next time you are dealing with a government department (which is unavoidable) and wondering why their procedure is so difficult, apply Nowlan's rule and consider whether the procedure, that is infuriating you, is making life easier for the bureaucrats. Invariably, this is so. Knowing this will not solve your problem but should make you less angry.

I usually end papers but inviting readers to send questions or comments. This time I do not, because I have no solutions to offer.

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