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The Four Quadrants of Administrative Effectiveness

By Rob Jenkins

First, a confession: I ripped off the basic premise for this column from an essay called "The Right Kind of Nothing," by Michael C. Munger, a professor of political science and chair of the department at Duke University.

Munger argued in that January column that the best administrators are those who accept a high degree of responsibility for what goes on in their territory but don't feel the need to control everything. They know, that is, when to do "the right kind of nothing."

After 18 years as a midlevel administrator at three different community colleges, I heartily concur. And, having obtained Munger's gracious permission, I would like to expand on his ideas. In doing so here, I borrow also from Stephen R. Covey, who in The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, designs a memorable matrix around the concepts of "important" and "urgent." By placing those two concepts on X and Y axes, he creates four quadrants: urgent but not important, important but not urgent, both urgent and important, and neither urgent nor important.

Following Covey's model, I've placed Munger's concepts of responsibility and control on similar X and Y axes to create what I call the four quadrants of administrative effectiveness. Each one represents a certain type of administrator.

High responsibility, low control. People who fall under this quadrant usually make the best administrators, and are among the most liked, because their willingness to accept responsibility means that they're not finger-pointers or buck-passers. Quick to accept blame, they're equally swift to deflect, and share, praise. They're rarely self-promotional types, preferring instead to lead by example and refusing to ask of others what they would not do themselves. They don't make a big deal out of being "in charge," but they're always in the wheelhouse when the ship encounters a storm.

And yet they're not control freaks. They have no interest in looking over people's shoulders or micromanaging. Rather, they subscribe to
the philosophy of hiring good people and then letting them do their jobs. For college faculty members, most of whom just want to be left alone as much as possible, administrators in this category are truly a godsend. (They're also pretty rare, although I've heard an actual specimen is preserved in the Smithsonian.)

These administrators are highly effective because people trust them and believe they can count on them. They seek consensus whenever possible but aren't afraid to make tough decisions when necessary. And they usually manage to get the important things done without making any more enemies than they have to (it being virtually impossible to get anything done as an administrator without making a few enemies).

**High responsibility, high control.** Next is this group of administrators, who are often well liked, even beloved, because they give everything they have to the job and everyone knows it. They may be a little controlling—sweating the details, worrying that everything is done correctly and on time—but people tend to overlook the negative because they also take so much personal responsibility for everything.

These are the administrators who slave away in their offices until 8 p.m. or 9 p.m. every day—and then still take piles of paperwork home with them. They're the ones who send those e-mails messages you receive at 8:30 in the morning, when you first sit down at your computer with a cup of coffee—you know, the e-mails that were sent at 7 a.m. Or 5:30. Or 2:14.

They can be effective, to a degree, because they get things done—even if they end up doing those things themselves, which is often the case. The problem is that this level of commitment, which borders on obsessive-compulsive behavior, is difficult to sustain. Such administrators tend to burn out after a few years. They develop ulcers or high blood pressure. They have nervous breakdowns (which are occasionally, in my experience, quite public).

And even if they don't burn out, they tend to burn out the people around them, who can't withstand the pace. In the end, even faculty members and fellow administrators who like and admire these individuals personally will begin avoiding them like clingy students or desperate job-seekers, because they know that any chance meeting could result in yet another project.

**Low responsibility, low control.** The third administrative type is probably the least effective, though not the most despised. I say that because they are neither control freaks nor micromangers; rather, they tend to leave people alone, like their high-
responsibility, low-control colleagues. That is one of the qualities that faculty members most appreciate in administrators.

The problem is that, unlike their high-responsibility colleagues, the low-responsibility types tend to leave everything else alone, too, including their own duties. Basically, they're lazy. Some people in this category take administrative jobs simply because they're tired of teaching and want a break. Some are close to retirement, hoping just to hold on for a few more years without rocking any boats. For whatever reason, they don't want to do too much. True, they don't expect much of faculty or staff members—which can be good, from a faculty or staff point of view, at least at first—but, unfortunately, such administrators don't expect much of themselves, either.

They make rotten leaders for the simple reason that they don't lead. Eventually, even those faculty and staff members who once appreciated the autonomy will start to wonder who's steering the ship. And when they find out that being autonomous, in this case, means that they're expected to steer the ship themselves—and hoist the sails, and swab the decks—the result can sometimes be mutiny.

**Low responsibility, high control.** The title of most-despised administrator belongs to this group of "leaders." They're also among the least effective. (It would be cynical of me to suggest that the majority of administrators fall into this category. That's probably not true. It only seems that way.)

They are always passing the buck, forever pointing fingers, constantly throwing subordinates and colleagues under the bus. They demand the lion's share of the credit for any success, but they will quickly lay the blame for failure at the feet of someone else—anyone else. Despite constant talk of "teamwork," they're generally reluctant to involve themselves in anything that smacks of actual work. They also love to remind people that they're "the boss," as if that fact weren't already the stuff of nightmares.

Whereas low-responsibility, low-control types are lazy but laid-back, the low-responsibility, high-control leaders are an especially objectionable combination: indolent themselves yet irrationally demanding of others. Inveterate micromanagers, they love to nitpick, find fault, and demean those who are actually in the trenches, while keeping themselves as far from the front lines as possible.

To the extent that they can cow people into performing, these administrators can be moderately effective for a while. Over time, though, their ability to get things done begins to wane as the work environment becomes toxic, enveloped in an almost palpable
atmosphere of anger, bitterness, resentment, and distrust. Morale declines, and ultimately productivity with it, until the administrator is finally shown the door—or promoted. In higher education, it's kind of a toss-up.

Of course, few administrators are perfect examples of any single type. My hope in writing this is that, by plotting themselves on the responsibility and control axes, the more self-aware individuals will be able to determine which quadrant they inhabit and make the appropriate adjustments—either by accepting more responsibility or relinquishing more control—to move closer to the high-responsibility, low-control ideal.

As for those who are less than self-aware, well, maybe someone will slip a copy of this column or Munger's under their door, with the appropriate sections highlighted.

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