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Principled Agents: The Cultural Bases of Behavior in a Federal Government Bureaucracy

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Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, Volume 4, Issue 3, 1 July 1994, Pages 277–318, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a037210>

Published: 01 July 1994

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Abstract

In recent years, the rational choice approach to understanding bureaucratic

behavior has gained many adherents. So-called principal-agent models of bureaucratic behavior have considerable value. But they are far better at explaining why bureaucrats shirk (goof off on the job), subvert (commit acts of administrative malfeasance), or steal (use public office for private gain) than they are at explaining why bureaucrats behave as “principled agents” —workers who do not shirk, subvert, or steal on the job even when the pecuniary and other tangible incentives to refrain from these behaviors are weak or nonexistent. These workers also often perform thankless tasks, go above and beyond the call of duty, and make virtual gifts of their labor even when the rewards for behaving that way are highly uncertain at best. This article explores the cultural basis of behavior in one government agency, the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). Together with what is known about other strong-culture government agencies, the case of the BOP argues for the efficacy of social, moral, and symbolic incentives in shaping bureaucratic behavior. Rational choice theorists who discount the possibility of publicspirited bureaucratic behavior are wrong, as are any who deny the capacity of agency leaders to create and sustain organizational cultures of principled agents. Future research should explore the general political, administrative, legal, and budgetary conditions under which organizational cultures of principled agents arise, persist, and change.

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