SEVEN LETTERS

The case that follows is in the management area, although it brings into sharp focus some broad theoretical problems of hierarchy and staff-line relationships and it touches on the problem of performance budgeting. It presents the “What do you do now?” type of problem; it also can be considered with a view to analyzing and explaining behavior in large-scale organizations. Again, it may be considered as an illustration of concepts of authority or bureaucracy, or as supporting ideas of how government should be administered.

The names used in the case are disguised, but the problem is a real one and the letters were actually written by city officials. The case, presented for discussion purposes, is not intended to represent either correct or incorrect administrative practices.

Cast of Characters:

Clyde Perham  
City Manager

H.P. Robertson  
Director of the City Water Department, an officer appointed by and responsible to the city manager.

Mark B. Mason  
Chief Engineer and Superintendent of Production in the City Water Department, appointed by the director of the Water Department under civil service regulations. Mason is a registered professional sanitary engineer who has held the post in the Water Department for many years.

R.J. Herrington  
Superintendent of Purification, also appointed by the director of the Water Department under civil service regulations, but immediately responsible to the chief engineer. Herrington’s office is at the pumping plant about two miles from City Hall.

Paula A. Harper  
Chief of the Office of Budget and Allotments, a staff agency of the manager. Harper has held the position for less than two years and has been employed in the office for about four years.
Roger Graham  Assistant in the Office of Budget and Allotments, under appointment by Paula Harper. Graham has been employed for less than a year. He is still under civil service probation, but has been recommended for final appointment.

All offices are in the City Hall except that of Mr. Herrington. The Office of Budget and Allotments is near the Manager’s Office; the Water Department Offices are located in a different section of the building.

The exchange of letters will indicate the subject matter of telephone conversations between the two agencies. However, two items not disclosed by the letters have been reported by Roger Graham: (1) the Office of Budget and Allotments has noted that excesses of personnel costs over estimates in the past have been accounted for almost entirely by overtime work; and (2) Graham visited the purification plant after his first telephone conversation with Herrington, and is of the opinion that overtime work at the plant can be virtually eliminated if the additional personnel are employed.

First Letter, February 5

Date: February 5, 1993
To: Paula A. Harper, Office of Budget and Allotments
cc: H. P. Robertson, Director, Water Department
From: Mark B. Mason, Chief Engineer and Superintendent, Water Department
Re: Additional Personnel

I am writing for approval to employ additional personnel in the Purification Section of the Water Department. The classifications and number of each that we are requesting are as follows:

- Water Treatment Operator 4 additional Permanent
- Maintenance Laborer 4 additional, from April 15 to November 1
- Laboratory Technician 1 additional permanent -- either full time or part time, dependent on the qualifications and availability of applicants

The explanation of our needs for these additional personnel is fairly well set out in R. S. Herrington’s memo of February 2, which is attached to this memorandum. I, therefore, will not go into any further detail at this time but will be glad to furnish more information if you require it.

Memo Attached to Letter of February 5

Date: February 2, 1993
To: Mark Mason, Chief Engineer and Superintendent
From: R.J. Herrington, Superintendent of Purification
Re: Increase in operating personnel
I would like to recommend that the present operating personnel in the Purification Section be increased to the extent that there are two chemical attendants on each shift at the Chemical Building; there is a laborer on each shift in the filter room during the summer months, and that an additional laboratory technician be provided in the laboratory. This will require 4 additional treatment operators, 4 additional maintenance laborers, and 1 laboratory technician.

**Chemical Building**

At the present time the operating personnel at the Chemical Building consists of one treatment foreman and one chemical attendant on each shift, except in the case of the 7-3 shift where there is an extra chemical attendant part of the time, namely Saturday & Sunday.

The water treatment foreman is now spending approximately 3/4 of his time in collecting samples, making analytical determinations, and in calculation of doses. This leaves insufficient time to look after the operation of basins, equipment, etc. When trouble develops either the samples do not get collected or the analyses are made in such haste that the results are inaccurate. At the present time more frequent analyses should be performed on the raw water. During periods of peak consumption or peak hardness more frequent analyses should be performed on the various phases through the plant. With the expanding plant there will be more sample and check points.

The treatment operator at present is occupied in tending chemical feed machines, checking on boilers and allied equipment, and the handling of bulk chemicals that are fed by hand. During periods of maximum operation, it is impossible to give feed machines sufficient attention.

The operations at the Chemical Building are fast becoming decentralized, such as carbon feeders, CO₂ production, and primary basins.

A second treatment operator on each shift at the Chemical Building will provide the additional staff to cover the above situations for the present time. The time of the extra treatment operator would be split about equal between the collection of samples along with basin operations and the application of chemicals.

**Filter Plant**

The filter operator is now spending between 5 to 6 hours per day washing filters. It requires approximately 30 minutes to surface wash a filter and 15 minutes to back wash. Washing filters without surface washing over extended periods is not advisable as evidenced by condition and performance of filters at the end of such period.
Seven Letters

As the filter plant approaches its maximum capacity, it will be necessary that the filter operator devote his entire time to operation and manipulation of filters.

The addition of a laborer to each shift in the filter plant during the period May through October for surface washing filters will be necessary.

Laboratory

The present laboratory personnel can no longer absorb any additional work. In recent years there have been increases in bacteriological examination and chemical analyses of the water in the distribution system. The testing of materials has been expanded. At present the laboratory is not doing anything but routine work. It is no longer possible to investigate all complaints and guide visitors through the plant properly. Some additional control analyses are required on raw water.

The addition to the laboratory of a trained employee such as a college student on a part-time basis would adequately fill the present needs and at the same time afford us the opportunity to be in constant touch with the latest methods and developments in chemical and bacteriological analyses.

This new employee could work evenings, which would alleviate otherwise crowded working conditions.

The receipt of these letters by Paula Harper was followed by two telephone calls made by Roger Graham, to whom the Water Department Budget work had been assigned.

First Graham called Mark Mason to explain that the Budget Office needed more detailed information before it passed upon the requests. The nature of the information desired is described in later correspondence. At the close of the conversation Mason and Graham agreed that Graham should call Herrington, and also that he might visit Herrington at the plant to get a first-hand picture of the situation.

Graham then called Herrington and explained to him the nature of the information needed. Herrington agreed to prepare a more detailed memorandum, which he would route through Mason.

Second Letter, March 10

Date: March 10, 1993
To: Mark Mason, Chief Engineer and Superintendent
From: R.J. Herrington, Superintendent of Purification
Re: Increase in operating personnel, filter plant

The addition of a laborer on each shift in the filter plant during the peak months was requested in order to provide sufficient staff to properly surface wash (with fire hose)
the filters. This operation requires approximately 30 minutes per filter. The filter operator will also be provided with sufficient time for making constant filter performance checks. In order to produce between 150-160 MG per day (“MGD”), all filters will have to operate at peak performance continuously.

During the summer of 1992, the maximum filtered was about 135 MGD or the capacity of the primary settling basin flumes. At this time washing of filters occurred when the above rate was no longer able to be maintained.

In the coming summer if sufficient water is available for filtration of 150-160 MGD, an individual average filter rate of 6.3 MGD for 150 MGD and a rate of 7.0 MGD for 160 MGD will have to be maintained with all filters in service. With an average of 22 filters in service this rate will be 6.7 MGD for 150 MGD and 7.3 MGD for 160 MGD.

The length of filter runs is affected by pH of the applied water, turbidity or suspended matter in applied water, retention time available in the final basins, and the elevation of the final basins. Surface washing of filters also has a bearing upon the length of filter runs.

As all of the above-mentioned items are apt to be critical at various times, it is difficult to estimate the number of washings that will be required for filtration of 150-160 MGD.

With final basin elevation of 33.0’ or less, filters will have to be washed at 3.0-4.0’ head loss. With a minimum final elevation maintained at 35.0’ the head loss could be extended to 5.0 to 6.0’ prior to washing.

Caustic water applied to filters tends to increase head losses very rapidly causing vapor locking of filters.

The amount of turbidity or suspended matter applied to the filters depends very largely upon the retention time available in final basins. At these high rates the bulk of the suspended matter, either carried over from secondaries or that formed as a result of chemical reactions, must be filtered out.

In view of the above facts it is estimated that each filter will have to be washed every 24 hours for 150 MGD rate and between 15-20 hours for 160 MGD rate.

Two telephone calls occurred between the second and third letters. Subject matter of the conversation again is indicated in the letters that follow.

The first call was made by Graham to Herrington, at which time Graham explained that the information set forth in the second letter was incomplete and enumerated the items of further information desired. Graham understood that Herrington agreed to prepare
another memo, which would again be routed by way of Mason. (See item 5 in Fifth letter).

The second interoffice telephone call was made by Mason to Harper. The purpose of the call is indicated in the third letter and in the Seventh letter (item 6).

**Third Letter, March 19**

Date: March 19, 1993
To: Mark B. Mason, Chief Engineer and Superintendent, Water Department
cc: H.P. Robertson, Director, Water Department
From: Paula Harper, Director, Office of Budget and Allotments
Re: Additional Personnel

On February 5, 1993, your request for additional personnel in the Purification Section came to this office. The staff member from this office in a conversation with you informed you he desired further information in order to evaluate the request and believed he had secured your verbal permission to contact the Superintendent of Purification and talked with him regarding the request. He asked that certain details be incorporated in a memo, sent to you for approval, and then forwarded to him. A memo, handled in that manner, was received in this office March 10, 1993. As it did not contain all of the information requested, another phone call was made to the Superintendent of Purification asking him if he would supply the information and forward through the same channels.

If you desire that all requests for information be sent to you in writing and permission to contact your subordinates on similar matters also be requested and approved in writing, we shall be glad to do so.

Therefore, in response to your telephone call of today, we request that the following information be forwarded to this office:

1) A description of the job duties that will be performed by the additional Water Plant Attendant on each shift.

2) Will this reduce overtime for this operation?

3) Will there be a continuing need for maintenance laborers to work on these shifts?

4) How many samples of water are taken on each shift and at what points and/or additional points will they be taken per shift?

5) Data on the number of chemical analyses being made at present, in the immediate future, and time needed to make these tests.
6) In general any other information that will in any way support your request for additional personnel requested.

Perhaps we may explain our position by pointing out that, based upon present minimum salaries, the yearly cost of this additional personnel would be $400,219 or over a 10-year period $4,002,190. Such an addition to fixed operating expense should receive careful consideration. I know you will agree with this.

**Fourth Letter, March 25**

Date: March 25, 1993  
To: Paula Harper, Director, Office of Budget and Allotments  
From: Mark B. Mason, Chief Engineer and Superintendent, Water Department  
cc: Clyde Perham, City Manager  
H. P. Robertson, Director, Water Department  
Re: Additional Operating Personnel- Purification Division

I am starting this letter with some hesitation. I have a high regard for you and several of the members of your staff with whom I am acquainted. Therefore, I am embarrassed by making what seems to be a personal attack on you and the members of your staff when my real target is the sort of bureaucratic system that puts you and your staff in a position of authority (without responsibility) that in my opinion you are not qualified by experience, training and numbers to carry out.

When I phoned the other day to ask that you put your request for information into written form I stated that I did not believe that your people knew what they were doing in the case of our request for additional operating personnel in the Purification Section. The letter, dated March 19, that you sent me confirms my opinion.

Your first question asking for “a description of the job duties that will be performed by the additional Water Plant Attendant on each shift” indicates that all of the time spent on this subject to date by both your staff and mine has been completely wasted.

Let me list some of the things that have happened that should have produced the answer to the above as well as all the other information that you request in your March 19 letter.

1) On February 5, I wrote a short memo to you transmitting a two-page typewritten letter from our Superintendent of Purification stating what additional personnel he needed and why. He wrote exactly 24 typewritten lines about the Water Plant Attendant position and indicated fairly well what the duties would be.

2) A few days later your Mr. Graham phoned to say that he wanted to visit the plant in regard to our request for additional personnel. We then continued to talk at some
length about the need and duties of the additional staff. We talked about these matters to such an extent that I thought Mr. Graham had obtained all the information he wanted and was not going to visit the plant after all.

3) Following this, two phone calls were made by Mr. Graham to the Superintendent of Purification. Each one was fairly long, 10 minutes or so, and both were concerned about the additional operating personnel.

The first phone call resulted in another full page memo from the Superintendent of Purification and the second phone call was for the purpose of requesting still another memo. It was at this point that I protested. It seems to me that by this time you should know what we are going to do with the extra staff.

Your second question, “Will this reduce overtime for operation?” seems to be superfluous. It is obvious that any overtime caused by a shortage of personnel would be reduced by the addition of more personnel.

Your third question, “Will there be a continuing need for maintenance laborers to work on these shifts?” is in about the same category as the question on overtime. If the occasion arises, as it has in the past and as it undoubtedly will in the future, where more personnel are require than are available in the operating force, then maintenance laborers will be used as necessary.

Your next questions imply that you have a working knowledge of our operating procedures that is belied by your first question. If I thought you could make use of the answers to these questions I would obtain the information for you. I do not believe that you are well enough acquainted with the problems and procedures of operating a Purification Plant to warrant my bothering the Superintendent of Purification with a request for data on these items.

In regard to your closing paragraphs wherein you point out that the additional cost to fixed operating expense should receive careful consideration, I want to say that I heartily agree with you. In fact, I believe that I have considered the cost even more carefully than you have. According to my figures the yearly cost based upon present minimum salaries for the additional operating personnel would be only $246,288 instead of the $400,219 quoted in your March 19 memo.

A letter of this type is not complete if it does not contain recommendations for correcting the complaint. For that reason I suggest that the following steps be taken.

If the system as it now exists is to continue I suggest that you obtain an adequate number of qualified people to work with our department who will have the time and ability to study and understand our needs and to take effective action when it is necessary. Our experiences with your Department have left us with a feeling of harassed frustration. We are hesitant about attempting to obtain needed personnel because we
know from past experience that in most cases we will spend weeks and months -- sort of like dangling from the end of a string before getting an answer. There have of course been some exceptions. This would not be too impossible a situation if the matter would end in your department. After you have finally made a decision, we quite often have to go through the same song and dance with the Personnel Department. There should not be so many obstacles put in our path. You should give us better and more understanding service than you have in the past.

If you cannot operate as described above then I suggest that you concern yourself only with the budget side of the problem. If the budget appears to be strained by the additional personnel you should notify us accordingly and we would decide then either to give up some other budgeted item or to give up the additional personnel.

You could supplement this type of activity by making periodic surveys of our operations to see if we were over-staffed or not and if we were making effective use of our personnel.

I like this latter suggestion much better than the first because I can see where you could produce a real service much easier than you could under the first suggestion.

I stated at the beginning that I hesitated to write this letter. It is embarrassing to me to have to do so. It will probably cause a commotion. I heard a sermon last Sunday that was entitled “Use a Little Honey.” The moral was that you can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar. I wish that I was clever enough to have been able to coat this letter with a generous layer of honey because I have no desire to start a fight or harm anyone or to embarrass anyone. But I do want to get a condition straightened out that I do not believe is fair, or proper or necessary.

Maybe this letter will accomplish that purpose.

**Fifth Letter, April 13**

Date: April 13, 1993  
To: Mark B. Mason, Chief Engineer and Superintendent, Water Department  
cc: Clyde Perham, City Manager  
H. P. Robertson, Director, Water Department  
From: Paula Harper, Director, Office of Budget and Allotments  
Re: Additional Personnel-Purification Section

I sincerely hope that you will not hesitate, in the future, to notify me if you are dissatisfied in any way with the services of this department. It is my intent, and I believe also that of the City Manager, that this department be primarily a service department assisting line departments to operate as expeditiously as possible within the overall framework of municipal government. Not being perfect, we sometimes fail in this endeavor.
To a certain extent you are correct when you state that we are unqualified by experience, training, etc., to judge your requests. Therefore, it is necessary that we ask questions. We try not to judge any request on a technical basis, rather we attempt to get the technically qualified person to explain the problem to us so that we understand and can make a cogent recommendation to the Manager. If a satisfactory and understandable explanation is not presented, we feel this to be an indication that the request is not too well thought out and needs further work.

As to your suggestions for improving the situation, I agree heartily with you that little would be accomplished by our maintaining a balance sheet and at certain dollar signs saying stop. That is most unrealistic and is of little or no help to a department. Insofar as possible we try to actually survey field conditions when investigating a request, but during the past two months the preparation of the annual budget has made this mostly impossible.

As to the specific items in your memo of March 25, 1993:

1) On February 8, your memo and the attached memo from the Superintendent of Purification was received in this office.

2) Later a member of this office phoned you. He talked with you about the request, a visit to the plant, and of making contact with the Superintendent of Purification.

3) Subsequently, a phone call was made to the Superintendent of Purification and the request was discussed with him. The Superintendent was asked that certain details be incorporated in a memo, sent to you for approval, and then forwarded to this office.

4) A memo, handled in this manner, was received in this office March 10, but it contained only part of the information requested. Thus, the call for another memo.

5) A second phone call was made to the Superintendent of Purification, asking him to supply the work-load data and to forward it through the established channels. During the conversation it was mentioned that the cost of the additional personnel would be partially offset by savings in overtime and use of present personnel. It was requested that an estimate of these possible savings be included in the memo.

As to the questions included in our memo of March 19th:

a) A description of the job duties that will be performed by the additional treatment operator on each shift?

   We understood that the additional person on each shift would perform a combination of jobs now partly performed by the present Water Plant Attendant and
partly by the Water Treatment Foreman. It was felt that possibly the combining of job
duties would bear upon a question of proper job classification.

b) Will this reduce overtime for this operation?

We were seeking confirmation of the telephone conversation with the
Superintendent of Purification. I am in no position to assume anything. I must know.

c) Will there be a continuing need for maintenance laborers to work on these shifts?

Again, seeking confirmation of the telephone conversation. This would directly
affect the request for additional personnel for this position. There have been occasions
when part-time help have been kept longer than authorized.

d) How many samples of water are taken on each shift and at what points and/or
additional points will they be taken per shift?

This information would supply us with a basis for evaluation the need for extra
personnel and how much.

e) Data on the number of chemical analyses being made at present, in the immediate
future, and time needed to make these tests?

This is again needed for an evaluation of needs. There was no detail of this nature
included with original budget requests.

f) In general, any other information that will in any way support your request for
additional personnel?

We were trying to obtain any other information that would aid us in evaluating
your request.

g) Lastly, and to my great chagrin, I find that you are correct when you state that the
cost request will be $246,288 instead of $400,219. This certainly is the one area where
I should be right, but wrong I am. Next time I will not use that slide rule!

    I personally do not like honey. I much prefer the straightforwardness you have
exhibited. Both you and I will make mistakes, but neither of us has anything to be
ashamed of or to conceal. Therefore, I re-emphasize my desire that you communicate
directly to me any impression of delay or impropriety you may have in the future.

    In conclusion, I should appreciate it if you would send me the information
requested in my memorandum of March 19, 1993 in order that this matter may be closed
out at the earliest possible date.
Sixth Letter, April 15

Date: April 15, 1993
To: Paula Harper, Director, Office of Budget and Allotments
cc: Clyde Perham, City Manager
H.P. Robertson, Director, Water Department
From: Mark Mason, Chief Engineer and Superintendent, Water Department
Re: Additional Operation Personnel - Purification Division

Your letter of April 13 brings to mind a dog I once knew named Rover. Rover’s owner would hold out a biscuit to the dog and say, “Roll over, Rover!”

Rover would roll over, but his owner, still holding out the biscuit would then say, “Now bark, Rover.”

Rover, eyeing the biscuit expectantly, would say, “Bow Wow!”

The owner would then say, “Bark again, Rover.” And Rover would again say, “Bow Wow!”

This went on for some time until one day when Rover, after having said “Bow Wow” several times, laid down on the ground and would never roll over or say Bow Wow again.

Unlike Rover, I will undoubtedly have to roll over and say Bow Wow many times in the future. However, I have only a couple of Bow Wows left for the case of the additional operation personnel at the purification plant.

In regard to the first five questions of your March 19 memo, I have nothing to add to what has already been said.

In regard to your sixth question, I should tell you that if we cannot fill the additional positions the following will certainly occur.

1) It will be impossible to produce the quantity of water that our plant would otherwise be able to produce by this June. An amount that we hope will be at least as great as the demand.

2) It will be impossible to control the quality of the water at the high demand rates expected this summer and most of the time thereafter. Loss of control of quality may or may not be detrimental to the public health.

3) Loss of control of quality will be accompanied by a loss of control of chemical costs. This is very vital when you consider that the cost of chemicals alone for this current fiscal year has averaged about $8,500 per day.
Seventh Letter, April 28

Date: April 28, 1993
To: H.P. Robertson, Director, Water Department
cc: Clyde Perham, City Manager
From: Paula Harper, Director, Office of Budget and Allotment
Re: Additional Operation personnel - Purification Division

You undoubtedly have copies of the communications sent to me by Mr. Mason, dated March 25 and April 15, in response to my memos to him, dated March 19 and April 13.

A brief restatement of the development of this situation follows:

1) On February 8, Mr. Mason’s memo and that attached memo from the Superintendent of Purification were received in this office.

2) Later a member of this office phoned Mr. Mason. He talked with him about the request, a visit to the plant, and of making a contact with the Superintendent of Purification.

3) Subsequently, a phone call was made to the Superintendent of Purification and the request was discussed with him. The Superintendent was asked to incorporate certain details in a memo, send the memo to Mr. Mason for his approval, and have it forwarded to this office.

4) A memo, handled in this manner, was received in this office March 10, but it contained only part of the information requested. Thus the call for another memo.

5) A second phone call was made to the Superintendent of Purification, asking him to supply the work-load data and to forward it through the established channels.

6) On March 19, Mr. Mason contacted me by phone and expressed his desire that all requests for information be sent to him in writing and that requests for permission to contact his subordinates on similar matters be submitted to him for his written approval.

7) My memo to Mr. Mason (March 19) was sent in response to his telephone request.

A copy of this and my subsequent memo were sent to you.

It would appear that Mr. Mason will not or cannot furnish this office with the information that we feel is essential if we are to properly evaluate his request and make a recommendation to the Manager. If, as Mr. Mason states, the lack of personnel requested
will deprive the City of water it could otherwise have, the request should be approved. But if this is true, there must be reasons and this is what we are trying to determine.

I would appreciate it if you would send me the information requested in my memorandum of March 19, 1993 to Mr. Mason, or any other information you believe pertinent to the request for additional personnel.

I have no desire to engage in a running fight with any individual or department. This department has a certain job to do in the overall administration of the City’s activities. Sometimes differences of opinion result. This is inevitable. Usually through mutual cooperation these differences can be resolved in a satisfactory manner. If you have any suggestions as to how this spirit of cooperation can be enhanced, I will be only too glad to discuss it with you at your convenience.