

One barefoot step, a giant administrative leap

In order to create maximum development value, the bureaucracy needs to bring changes at the bottom of the public service pyramid, the citizen's first point of contact with the state Context , Can apply to IAS & IPS as well

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As the world observed U.N. Public Service Day on June 23, it was hard to miss the perfect storm brewing across the globe. Disenchantment with public service delivery has engulfed Brazil, Greece, Turkey and South Africa. Closer home, the disaster in Uttarakhand has highlighted the potential of public service to make or mar thousands of lives. Critically, public management is seen as failing the disadvantaged, especially those who have no choice but to resign to its inadequacies. In response to trenchant criticism, the global development discourse has focused on devising numerous policies, structures and strategies. But, inevitably, the front line, institutional mechanism has not received the kind of analytical attention it warrants.

Across the world, public organisations are typically characterised by rigid weberian structures with minimal space for individual innovation or creativity. Governance frameworks exhibit command and control characterised by top-down leadership and delegation upwards. Employees are adept at both overly respecting and exercising power, suppressing values of self in deference to those of the system. → The Problem

Building relationships

Not surprisingly, World Bank studies show that public service reform programmes are the most intractable. The recurrent challenge is to bring about changes in people and system performance. Harvard's Frauke C Weijer associates these failures with treating such socio-human resource challenges as mere technical ones to be tamed by procedures and bureaucratic structures. Bureaucrats are humans not a machines Essentially, preoccupations with form need to be replaced by an understanding that development is predicated on an uninhibited rejection of the status quo — that is, understanding development as a change endeavour focused on facilitating those at the bottom of the pyramid towards higher satisfaction levels. Function is more important than forms

What this means is that change should necessarily begin at the bottom, the site of frequent interaction between citizens and the monolithic state. It is the experience of this interface that determines the quality of the service and how citizens subsequently view the state. This front line actuality epitomises the concept of Barefoot Bureaucracy — a construct that is bureaucratic in its regulatory behaviour yet barefoot in its proximity with the citizen and their shared socio-cultural and economic milieu. Barefoot bureaucracies reflect this personality paradox in the wide gamut of their choice, ranging from the whimsical bureaucratic gatekeeping in routine implementation, to yeoman barefoot service during disasters. In a world of scarce resources, who is granted access to free medicines, the water tap or the destitute pension? These are the many moral judgements they make everyday. Yet, there is potential in this paradox. Research has shown that successful public organisations are characterised by unusual dedication of ground-level employees to their jobs, with a strong sense of mission, purpose and the capacity to build relationships based on trust and ownership with communities. Focus is usually at top . E.g. IAS & IPS

Foot soldiers

Herein lies the opportunity. A performing barefoot bureaucracy can transform both the organisation and the people it serves as it is only in the interactions with the disadvantaged, that public organisations create maximum, incremental, economic and human developmental value. Public management needs to recognise the cutting edge as the value zone and the foot soldiers as the catalytic change agents. Clearly, the organisational structure should be geared towards creating an enabling environment for the change agent to perform its value functions to the best of individual and collective capabilities — the performance of an extension worker, a health worker or a teacher has a disproportionately large influence on the final outcomes of state programmes.

If we are to solve common action problems we need approaches that are consistent with public management, that encourage developmental value creation at multiple levels. Therefore, any attempt at change in public service performance would need to be barefoot bureaucracy-centric for creating maximum impact and ensuring its distortion free implementation. Such an inversion suggests a dilution, if not destruction, of the bureaucratic command structure to be replaced by a polycentric organisation encouraging a network of multiple-change leaders dispersed across the hierarchy. Each would be empowered with the freedom to create unique service pathways in response to their differing contexts, to honour their collective commitment to the common purpose. Nodes in this polycentric network would thrive on diversity with the understanding that each community requires a fresh exploration of social capital and forging of new relationships between the citizen, node and thus the state.

Noble laureate Elinor Ostrom posited this as a changed understanding of the role and relationship of public professionals and citizens. We can visualise them as utilising local knowledge, skills and experience towards co-creation of the service experience.

There is enough reason to hope that such change is not impossible. Large studies with U.S. social survey data found a strong correlation between public service motivation and preference for government jobs. A Dutch study found that government workers had higher levels of public service motivation than private sector workers. In the post-market collapse across the globe, front line pro-social activities have gained ground over the 'I' perspective popularised by rational choice economics. ↗ Values

Evidence apart, conceptually the desired transformation is predicated on the values and behaviour of barefoot bureaucracy. Values are the priorities we live by and are expressed in our choices. Human values are important to both achieving desired organisational goals and the care and management of common-pool resources. The challenge is to encourage, align and establish the desired values in the organisation.

Along with values, behaviour changes determine the individual and societal transformations that we seek. Public behaviour is essentially shaped by attitudes and perspectives. Any attempt at behaviour change requires addressing the cognitive, emotional and intentional segments of attitudes. Attitude And also redefining perspectives about the organisational purpose (development with dignity), the process (co-creating service) and people (reaching the unreached) at individual and group levels. Complex though it seems, such a transformation can be achieved. A multilayered randomised evaluation undertaken by Unicef of an extensive change programme carried out in South India found a threefold improvement in front line, barefoot bureaucrat behaviours, as experienced by socially disadvantaged groups.

About change

Globally, public services are under intense pressure to improve performance. While many structural reforms have been tried, barefoot bureaucracy has been consistently bypassed. Undeniably, sustained development can only be achieved by triggering the value creating potential at the bottom of the public service environment. Global policymakers should repose faith in these subalterns and reap the benefit of silent evolutionary change. With just mundane means they can generate spectacular ends. The tiger will change its stripes.

(Vibhu Nayar is a senior civil servant. The views expressed are personal.)