Changing Mindsets of Middle Level Officers in Government Organizations

S Ramnarayan

This paper uses a simple system of classification for examining mindsets of middle level officers in government organizations. It proposes that a middle level officer may assume or take on a spectator mindset or an actor mindset. With a spectator mindset, the person may pick up a signal from the environment or get an idea for improvement but he/she does not act on that learning or insight. As a result, organizational learning does not occur and this is reflected by organizational inaction or inappropriate action. On the other hand, with actor orientation, the individual acts on his/her learning and this leads to the right organizational action.

This paper proposes that spectator orientation is rooted in four major factors:

- organizational characteristics
- nature of relations with superior
- the way work is performed
- the nature of middle management role.

When the organization is perceived as conflict-ridden, rule bound, having too many free-riders and not oriented to customer and stakeholder requirements, there is a tendency for spectator mindset to predominate. This mindset also results in hierarchical, impersonal, and non-appreciative relations with superior.

The third factor that leads to spectator mindset is the way work is performed. When the emphasis is more on performing activities in a ritualistic mode rather than to have impact and when there is inadequate attention to linkage, integration, and people management issues, spectator mindset is more likely. Finally, the nature of roles at operating levels such as fragmentation and segmentation of functions and excessive preoccupation with fix-it type of activities can lead to spectator orientation. Any attempt to change the mindset has to therefore address these four important factors.

This paper reviews some change experiments and experiences in governmental organizations in India to propose two broad approaches to bring about organizational and mindset changes:

- Transformational approach which aims to bring about new strategy, management processes, and approaches by creating a new equilibrium for the organization.
- Continuous improvement approach which focuses on small doses of incremental changes that affect only part of the organization by modifying ways and means of doing work. It builds on the efforts of organizational members.

This paper discusses these two approaches in some detail and examines the factors that are critical for the success of each of these approaches. It looks at how these approaches can also complement and strengthen each other. There can be no two opinions on how important it is to change mindsets in government organizations. This paper is an attempt to review some recent change experiences to shed some light on this important issue.
A stakeholder was having an interesting conversation with a middle level officer in a government department. The officer was talking about a decision process that was under way and which pertained to his area of work. After mentioning about the cumbersome journey of the decision through the corridors of bureaucracy, he joked about the endless meetings with indifferent participants and the unwieldy procedures with little concern for timeliness. He concluded that the final decision was certainly expected to end up wasting a lot of resources and still not achieve the intended purpose. After listening to the graphic account, the stakeholder asked the officer as to why he could not influence the process and ensure that the right decision was made. The question seemed to surprise the officer at the operating level. He pointed out that the decision was made by the government and not by him. But, the stakeholder persisted, “You are the government in this case. After all, the matter pertains to your area of work.” The officer felt a bit irritated by the comment. He perceived the stakeholder as having too simplistic a view of the situation. He said, “You do not understand. I just move files. The governmental system makes the decision. And it specializes in wasting resources and frustrating people. And I cannot help it.”

‘SPECTATOR’ AND ‘ACTOR’ MINDSETS

In the above illustration, the middle level officer had clearly assumed the stance of a ‘spectator’ rather than that of an ‘actor’ in the system. With a spectator orientation, he could see what was happening; he could comment on it; but there was no way he felt capable of exercising positive influence to move the decision in the right direction. The implicit assumption was that he was quite powerless in the situation.

How does such a mindset influence the functioning of a government agency? Let us say that an officer at the operating level in a government department has received instructions relating to the introduction of a scheme. With several years of experience behind him, he is aware of the ground realities. He may quickly realize that the scheme has some lacunae which would defeat its intended purpose. But, the ‘spectator’ mindset leads to certain implicit choices. The middle level officer does not share this feedback with higher levels. Instead, he passes on the papers down the line in a routine way for action. As a result, his knowledge and insight do not diffuse to the larger system and the scheme is taken up for action and predictably gets mired in difficulties.

In other words, even when the members of the system are aware that the decision or approach is destined to fail, the organization itself continues to function as if it does not know of the potential minefields that are bound to cripple the decision. Thus, when the employees assume the stance of ‘spectator’ rather than ‘actor’ in the system, there is little hope for the concerned agency to learn through anticipatory and proactive actions. Instead, the agency runs into hurdles that could have been easily anticipated and avoided and, in the process, the customers, citizens or other stakeholders are made to suffer setbacks and crises needlessly.

As can be seen from Figure 1, an organization can learn and adapt its actions only if the organizational member, who picks up the signal, acts on the signal. We can say that, in this case, the concerned employee is the individual learning agent through whom the organization learns. The individual learning agents need not necessarily be organizational members at the operating level;
they could even be customers/citizens receiving the service or any other person or group that has a potentially valuable input for decision-making.

But, Figure 1 also demonstrates that such individual learning or insight does not automatically lead to organizational learning. When organizational members behave like spectators, their information, ideas, and insights do not flow to the decision-making levels. When channels connecting the different parts of the organization are choked, valuable views and perspectives are lost to the decision-makers. As a result, decisions are made with partial perspectives and insufficient understanding and government departments appear to function in an unthinking manner. Unfortunately, that only serves to reinforce the spectator mindset.

In this paper, we focus on the behavioural dynamics of government officers at the operating levels. We examine a number of questions:

- Why do the officers at the operating levels tend to follow the path of least resistance?
- What factors reinforce the ‘play safe’ attitude?
- What factors prevent officers at middle levels from functioning as responsible members and sorting out issues in the agency’s best interests?
- When decision-making processes are characterized by impersonal file and paper movements, poor judgments, inordinate delays, and apparent paradoxes, how do they affect the employee perceptions about the organization?

Our purpose is to understand the factors that lead employees at the cutting edge of the government departments to either feel energized to perform and excel or feel deflated, powerless, and incapable of taking charge. This paper is based on observations of day-to-day behaviour of operating level officers in their work context and discussions with them as to why they do what they do. We know that most action is mediated by cognitive frames and mental models and employees make sense of their environment through these cognitive frames. This paper explores the mindsets and implicit choices underlying the behaviour of middle level officers to gain insight into factors which mobilize or block their energies.

**OFFICERS AT OPERATING LEVELS**

In developing countries like India, government departments typically tend to be large hierarchies with multiple layers of management. As mentioned earlier, we focus on operating level officers in this paper. For our purpose, we define this category of employees as all those with supervisory/managerial responsibility but functioning below the level of the head of the department with an overall responsibility for a function or a department.

The operating level officers are expected to play a crucial role in ensuring that departmental activities are well-coordinated, that employees act responsively and responsibly, and that the agency continuously generates appropriate alternatives to grapple with its problems. Further, it is at this operating level that the government’s policies and strategies get translated into decisions and actions. However, it is evident that the nature of behavioural dynamics at this level has remained largely unexplored and appropriate strategies for effective utilization of this critical resource have not been examined. While the literature has focused a great deal on leadership roles and styles, there is a theoretical void in the nature of roles of the officers at operating levels and different aspects of their functioning. Even in the world of practice, the preoccupation is largely with the senior level as it is seen as being concerned with the important work of planning a strategy. The middle levels tend to be ignored as not very consequential because operating managers have to merely execute what has been visualized at the top. Unfortunately, when there is little attention to the nuts and bolts issues of execution, grand plans fail to bridge the chasm between the worlds of paper and practice.

Writings on managerial work suggest that, at the operating levels, work is more focused, more short-term in outlook, and the characteristics of brevity and fragmentation are more pronounced. According to some management scholars, three aspects characterize managerial work: demands, constraints, and choices. It is reasonable to assume that, at the operating level, managerial roles will be relatively low on choice and high on demands and constraints compared to higher levels.

As Figure 2 indicates, we may consider a simple framework in which middle level officers are seen to accomplish two essential organizational functions—a maintenance function oriented to ensuring current performance and results and an adaptation function which includes activities intended to promote innovation and growth, and aspects relating to the implementation of new ideas to deal with new challenges. Earlier studies have shown that operating management work consists largely of ‘fix-it’ type of activities—trying to deal with systems and processes that are not working and manage-
ing breakdowns in normal routine flow of work. Officers at the operating levels were found to be involved only to a very limited extent with the adaptation function.

**FRAMEWORK OF PERCEPTIONS AND CONSEQUENCES**

We have organized our observations in the form of a simple framework presented in Figure 3. As our purpose is to explore cognitive frames and mindsets of middle level government officers, we present their views or their perceptions regarding the nature of relations with superiors, characteristics of the organization, the way work is done (or not done), and the nature of their role at operating levels. The consequences of these perceptions for individual and organizational performance are also discussed. As would be quite evident from the framework, the consequences of the middle level worldview would further reinforce their perceptions of the reality and so mindsets would tend to get stabilized over a period of time. That is the reason why a change in mindset is an uphill struggle and demands energetic, conscious, and concerted efforts.

In the following sections, we discuss each aspect of the framework in some detail. The concluding section discusses what the organization needs to do to create an enabling work environment where employees feel like ‘actors’ capable of making meaningful contributions rather than like helpless ‘spectators.’

**Perceptions at Middle Levels**

Our observations indicate that in the worldview of middle level officers, there are numerous anomalies, paradoxes, and contradictions in organizational decision-making. These have been briefly examined below:

**Multiple power groups pulling in different directions:** The organizational functioning is sought to be influenced by multiple interest groups both within and outside the organizational boundaries each pursuing its own agenda even if that agenda is at variance with the overall organizational goals and interests. Each interest group possesses a certain amount of influence and so can derail change or at least create some road-blocks for effective implementation. So, the design tends to be excessively differentiated and inadequately integrated. This presents a major challenge in developing and implementing a common programme of action.

As a result of multiple power groups, there are constant pressures to make exceptions to rules, policies, and procedures. A few decision-makers yield to the pressures and deviate from the policy itself or from the established practice. So, after a certain point of time, it becomes difficult to figure out what the frameworks are. As exceptions get made without clear communication of the justification, others may say ‘if that person can get it, why not me?’ As a result, individuals persist with their demands even if they seem unjustified or irrational.

**Resource scarcity:** Another common complaint pertains to scarcity of resources and meaningless procedures. For example, while the head of the department may be talking of e-governance, the officer at the operating level may be confronting the problem of having no budget allocation for settling the electricity bill and hence face disconnection of power supply. In a resource-scarce environment, members are also dependent on the department for a number of things including personal benefits such as loans and access to valuable opportunities. This dependence creates additional complexities in the relationship between the officer and the department.
**Poor concern for performance**: The general view at the middle levels is that the organization has low concern for performance. The work is seen to have been completed when a circular or office order is released. In many cases, there is little or no follow-up to check if the desired impact has been achieved. There are also no consequences for performance or non-performance. There is a great deal of job security, few rewards for excellent performance, and hardly any disincentives for poor performance. In such an atmosphere, people work only because they want to work. The demands from the system are minimal.

**Free-riders**: As a result of the above factors, many free-riders exist in the system. For example, it was found that several quotas exist for a posting in the capital city in a state government department—individuals with sports background (so that they can pursue their sports interests), individuals with major illnesses (so that they have access to hospitalization facilities), individuals who have lost their spouse (so that they have access to family support system), and so on. Interestingly, there is also a quota for meritorious candidates and that is just 10 per cent of the overall strength. In the perception of officers at operating levels, the quota system was used even for staffing key positions. For members of such an organization, the system sends a powerful signal that merit and performance concerns are not high on the priority list and expectations from individual organizational members are quite low.

**Vicious cycle of ineffective implementation**: Discussions at middle levels indicate that the dominant view of the officers in this category is that they have little information, low control, and high constraints. They perceive the departmental structures and processes as incapable of accommodating their views and ideas. As a result, they see their roles as marginal and feel that they have little knowledge or information about why certain decisions

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**Figure 3: Issues and Concerns of Officials at Middle Levels**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions of Officials at Operating Levels</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizational Characteristics</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Organization perceived as excessively differentiated, conflict-ridden, rule bound, and having too many ‘free-riders.’ Not oriented to customer and other stakeholder requirements. Primary concern is with presenting positive accounts of performance on paper rather than in actual practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nature of Relations with Superior</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations are seen as hierarchical, impersonal, and non-appreciative. Little feedback and developmental inputs provided.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The Way Work is Done</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on file movements, paper work, and reports rather than on performing activities to have impact; avoidance or contracting out of unpleasant/difficult tasks; ad hoc placements/ transfers leading to absence of continuity of members in teams and lack of specialization. Inadequate attention to linkage, integration, and people management issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nature of Middle Management Role</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fragmentation and segmentation of roles and functions. Focus largely on maintenance or ‘fix-it’ type of activities rather than on entrepreneurial or developmental functions. Over-staffing leading to inadequate quantum of work and substantial amount of slack. No rewards for good performance and no punishment for poor performance.</td>
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**For Individual Middle Level Officers**
- Experience of stagnation, powerlessness, and lack of purpose
- Underdevelopment, underutilization, and blocked energies
- Dilution of standards for performance and discipline
- Low concern for generating new ideas or getting involved in developmental activities

**For Organizational Performance**
- Ineffective coordination, resource wastage, lack of development, lack of accountability, and absence of innovations
are made or not made. Not surprisingly, they experience low stakes in them. With many members perceiving low stakes, the system tends to be lethargic. There is little assurance that things would work as they are expected to. Any individual interested in performance or service is required to chase all the time to obtain that performance or service.

The poor implementation leads to a feeling that the organization does not really care. Decisions are announced when they are no longer relevant. With centralized decision-making based on obsolete records, actions can be totally off the mark. In such a scenario, the options available to people are to resign from their posts in the department, attempt to influence the decision-making or do nothing. In the perception of officers, resignation involves high personal costs and is not really an option for them. The burden associated with attempting to influence departmental decision-making is so high that there are no real incentives to exercise that influence. Unfortunately, that leads to the inevitable assumption that they can do very little in the given context. Not surprisingly, there is a tendency for people to become passive and indifferent.

We can see how this mindset is likely to be subject to self-reinforcing cycles. When individuals cling to their perception that no initiatives are really expected of them outside a narrowly defined area, they also cease to examine more effective ways of coping with the situation.

**Relationship with Superiors**

A key question is whether superior-subordinate relationship creates a context in which operating managers experience a sense of self-efficacy. It is generally agreed that the individual’s sense of personal power is closely related to feelings of personal efficacy and a sense of self-worth. It has been found that factors like feelings of mastery related to the job, the superior’s exemplary behaviour, and the superior’s encouragement and emotional support are significant sources of self-efficacy information. How do operating managers rate the quality of relationships in their organization?

**Impersonal relationship:** Our observations suggest that the relationship with the superior is governed by hierarchy. There is little team work or serious work-related consultation or discussion. The communication within the system is also perceived as ineffective. There are hardly any rewards for performance. Significant changes in work assignments, transfers or promotions are decided at very senior levels. This effectively renders an officer’s immediate superior redundant for decisions relating to rewards decisions. In fact, officers perceive the same superiors as competing with them for departmental favours. Few officers consider their superior as someone that they can look up to as a person and/or as a professional.

**Absence of standard setting and encouragement:** There are hardly any instances of superiors exhibiting the following aspects of an enabling style:

- having and communicating standards of excellence
- spotting opportunities for changes/innovations
- holding regular discussions on important departmental or organizational priorities
- taking a genuine interest in developing people
- levelling with others and getting out of hierarchical barriers
- building trusting relationships and facilitating team orientation.

**Nature of Operating Management Roles**

As indicated in Figure 3, there is fragmentation and segmentation of roles and functions and the focus is more on maintenance activities rather than on entrepreneurial or development activities.

**Narrowly defined roles:** The work at operating levels is perceived as largely routine, fragmented, segmented, and repetitive. Typically, a government department has a plethora of sections and sub-sections. These divisions on functional lines give rise to several distinct groups of employees. It is widely believed that boundaries harden around these groups as a large number of individuals at the lower levels practically spend their entire career in a single group. As a result, there is little collaboration across sections, regions or departments.

Not only is work highly segmented across different functions, it is also fragmented across the various levels of departmental hierarchy. With a large number of levels and functions, individuals also end up with ‘non-roles,’ where there is precious little to do. Each function and level tends to have its own viewpoint and the integration of these different viewpoints becomes quite difficult.

Moreover, in a tall hierarchy, personnel at the operating levels are primarily concerned with the execution of routine tasks. Most of the time, the roles are restricted to requesting for and chasing support from service functions or approvals and clearances from higher levels or cooperation from junior levels. It is widely perceived that any non-routine decision or developmental activity can only be initiated at senior levels.
Ineffective performance of developmental role: At the same time, sections entrusted with the developmental functions are generally perceived to be ineffective because of strong inter-functional boundaries and indifference at operating levels. To sum up, while the personnel at the operating levels face obstacles in performing developmental or entrepreneurial roles, there are relatively fewer problems in choosing the path of non-performance or mediocrity. On the other hand, people charged with developmental responsibilities restrict themselves to preparing plans and strategies on paper while complaining that they receive no cooperation in getting these implemented.

The Way Work is Done

By and large, the emphasis at operating levels is more on ‘moving the files’ and ‘completing the paper work’ rather than in performing activities to have an impact. As a result, there is little attention to linkage, integration, and people management issues.

Working through file movements: For every issue, a file is first opened. The file then makes its rounds through several offices with individuals adding their notes, writing their comments, and making the file thick over a period of time. For example, a study in a state government department indicated that there was nothing casual about even a casual leave application as it involved as many as 16 steps before it was approved. For certain other things, that was even more complex such as for the sanction of earned leave, there were 26 steps. With so many steps involved in the process, it is easy for an issue to slip and fall through the cracks at some stage and no feedback may be readily available on how and why the matter has come to a grinding halt.

In moving the files, attention is rarely directed to whether comments and notes actually lead to any useful change. The scheme is finally considered as ‘introduced’ when the office order or circular is released. Monitoring of the implementation is rare.

Lack of continuity at senior levels: At senior levels, officials are constantly shuffled around. They rarely get reasonable length of tenures of, say, three to five years to make lasting changes. In a study of two districts of Rajasthan, over a 20-year period, the average term of the district collector was found to be 14 months. The same was true for the block development officer. Wherever the officers go, they sign papers, write notes, and move files. There are no expectations that they would provide leadership to the department in the real sense of the term by building organizational capability and sustaining high levels of performance through a committed organization.

While there is no continuity at leadership levels, there is still a high level of centralization. In a study of a district magistrate in the state of Uttar Pradesh, it was found that 52 of the 66 departmental committees were chaired by the district magistrate. Forty-two of these committees related to rural development and 30 of these were chaired by the district magistrate. These committees would not meet in the absence of the chairperson. As day-to-day issues are also controlled at senior levels, delays are common in decision-making. Meaningful changes occur when energetic leaders take the proverbial bull by the horn, act on personal authority, and make changes happen. But such instances are rare.

Little attention to people management: Lack of attention to personnel issues hampers several initiatives. A state government invested considerable resources to training certain individuals to function as Information Officers for their departments. But, the subsequent placements of these individuals had little or no relationship to the training provided. Decisions pertaining to transfers and assignments are largely guided by short-term considerations and are rarely based on up-to-date personnel records and long-term plans.

Consequences

How do the factors listed above affect the emotional state of officers at operating levels and the perception about their roles and contributions in the organization?

With an impersonal and procedure-bound approach, most people feel unappreciated, ignored or even hurt by the larger organizational system. As processes for redressing grievances are largely ineffective, people tend to stay with their residual negative feelings. As a result, very few people believe that they have a ‘say’ in the functioning of the department. They do not experience a sense of centrality, efficacy, and positive influence. Not surprisingly, there is little motivation at the workplace for setting and achieving standards of excellence. They only respond to specific demands in their narrowly-defined work spheres and let go of opportunities to make improvements.

If we examine the perception of operating level officials, we would notice that a series of short-term steps have resulted in an organizational system that found itself in knots to initiate any meaningful change. There
were also a few negative loops or vicious cycles operating in the system as indicated below:

- When there is a high degree of centralization, it tends to alienate employees; therefore, they shirk responsibility. But, when individuals do not assume responsibility, it leads to greater centralization.
- Employee development does not occur when individuals are confined to narrow roles. But, this makes them unfit for larger roles over a period of time.
- When middle level officials display passive conformity or passive aggression towards senior and top executives, departmental leaders respond by building hierarchical and procedural walls between them and the operating level executives which aggravate the negative sentiments.

Several problems also emanate from over-staffing. First and foremost, in an excessively differentiated structure with several departments and sections, it becomes difficult to ensure meaningful assignments and grant the autonomy required to perform the tasks effectively. So, clear accountabilities are not defined at operating levels. When high performers see a number of employees around them getting away with very little or no performance, they begin to feel that the organization is taking advantage of them. Stated differently, the organization’s inaction towards the low performers leads the high performers to think of work as a punishment and, as a result, their motivation is adversely affected. On the other hand, when the low or non-performing employees see that their lack of performance does not perceptibly change the work unit’s outputs, they may conclude that their work is not very important or meaningful. When there is no guilt associated with lack of contribution and no external enforcement of accountability, the concerned employees are likely to experience little motivation to improve their performance.

The consequences are obviously serious for the overall performance of the department. As the officers are unable to perceive their roles in a larger systemic context, there are several negative outcomes:

- There are problems of coordination within the department and in the interface with other departments and agencies.
- There is lack of personal and professional development on the job. With the departmental context fostering only narrow specialization, the officers at the operating levels are unable to provide the leadership that is essential for making the changes required to enhance short-term and long-term performance.
- The responsibility for task completion remains diffused resulting in absence of accountability at various levels.
- Introduction and management of change runs into problems as operating officers stay rooted in ‘spectator’ stance and do not contribute their best to change efforts.
- There is gross underachievement of developmental tasks and unresponsive administration characterized by delays, corruption, and poor coordination.

To sum up, the work culture tends to ritualize most things. Activities are undertaken with little concern for outcome and impact. Real concerns do not get expressed in meetings. Different types of reports are prepared at considerable cost only to be filed away without initiating any corrective actions. People think that they have completed the work when they report a matter. There is little or no demand for performance upward or downward. Perhaps, the biggest crisis is that lower and lower standards of performance and service are accepted in the department without any serious questioning.

**OVERHAULING STRUCTURES AND SYSTEMS**

From the discussions so far, we can see that the mindsets of organizational members tend to be quite stable because their roots are in the form of unchanging formal and informal organizational systems. When the organizational factors such as the patterns of organizing work, people management practices, and interpersonal relationships remain essentially the same, mindsets continue in their old equilibrium state.

If we examine international experiences, we would see that successful changes in the functioning of government have been brought about in some countries by making significant changes in key organizational arrangements. For example, case studies of transformation in these countries indicate that major changes were introduced in four key aspects of the organization:

- organization of work
- people management
- organizational process
- leadership development.

**Organization of Work**

Significant changes were initiated by redefining
organization structure and roles of organizational members. Interventions were made to identify accountabilities and responsibilities at key levels and prevent crowding of hierarchy just to provide promotional opportunities for individuals.

**People Management**

Attention was paid to organizational planning and staffing issues. Policies and practices relating to selection and recruitment for key positions underwent dramatic changes. Competency identification and development was taken up especially for critical positions. Different aspects of people management such as assignment of roles, job rotation, rewards, and promotion were strengthened. Efforts were made to ensure a good ‘fit’ among these various components of people management. Different systems and processes were so designed that they complemented and supported each other.

**Organizational Processes**

Decision-making was simplified. Team work, result orientation, and initiative were strengthened to offset the inevitable pressure for excessive bureaucratization that governmental functioning implies.

**Leadership Development**

The quality of leadership was enhanced at different levels of the organization. Leaders were expected to invest efforts to change the work culture by mobilizing the energies of operating managers so that performance improvements could be sustained.

We would notice that these changes address the factors causing the ‘spectator’ mindset that we had outlined in Figure 3. Successful execution of such organizational changes in some governments has led to a significant transformation in the functioning of those governmental organizations. But, we must recognize that the changes of the kind outlined above are large and far reaching. Many of these changes pertain to the larger governmental system and so are beyond the purview of individual departments/organizations. For successful implementation, power dynamics inherent in such a transformation process has to be confronted and managed. So, changes can be initiated only with a strong political will at the highest levels in the government. They are liable to run into cultural inertia; therefore, without committed leadership and a long-term perspective, they have little chance of being initiated let alone taking roots in the departments and succeeding. While there can be little debate on the desirability of such structural changes, unfortunately, the probability of their getting introduced in India in the present context appears to be rather remote.

**CHANGE EXPERIMENTS AND EXPERIENCES**

When we examine the actual change efforts that have been attempted in governmental organizations in India, we find that there have broadly been two categories of approaches to bring about change in the organizations and the employee mindsets (Table 1).

In transformational approach, change tends to begin with strategic reviews. Such reviews take an overall organizational perspective and usually call for long-term changes. This approach seeks to break the existing frame of reference for the organization and create a new equilibrium. Thus, it aspires to transform the entire organization. Generally, this involves creation of a new strategy, management processes, and approaches in a breakthrough format. The intention is to create new services and totally different ways of working. For the purpose of discussion in this paper, we refer to such change efforts as ‘transformational approaches.’

A diametrically opposite approach is the one that begins with small doses of incremental changes. These changes affect only certain parts of the organization. They occur through normal structures and management processes. Being oriented to continuous progression, they do not disturb the equilibrium. They seek to build around the efforts of dedicated core groups of change agents who

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1: Overview of Strategic Review and Core Group Approaches</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Transformational Approach</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Creates new equilibrium by breaking the existing frame of</td>
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<tr>
<td>reference for the organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>strategy, management processes, and approaches in a</td>
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<tr>
<td>breakthrough format</td>
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<tr>
<td>Generally involves active intervention by external</td>
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<td>consultants</td>
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would plan and make small changes actually happen in the department with small investments of efforts. The purpose is also to demonstrate that change is possible from within without additional resources and larger organizational changes. If the group persists over a period of time and recruits supporters as in social movements, it is expected that changes would result in organizational mindsets. In this paper, we refer to this as the ‘continuous improvement approach.’

Both these approaches have been tried out in certain governmental organizations/departments in India. The following sections are based on experiences and observations of these change experiments. We discuss each approach in some detail and examine what have been observed to be the critical factors that are necessary for the given approach to succeed. Without those critical success factors, the efforts would merely generate a lot of activity and trumpeting but no real changes. And failed change experiments tend to reinforce the ‘spectator’ mindset in people.

Transformational Approach

The overall organizational reviews have been attempted in several state government departments where consulting studies have been commissioned to take a comprehensive look at the functioning of the organization. In a few of these state government departments, it would appear that there have been studies conducted sometime or the other on practically every single significant issue. These studies analyse different aspects of the strategy and working arrangement and present broad recommendations. But, experience of the actual implementation is hardly encouraging. Very few organizational / strategic review reports have been able to make the crucial transition from paper to practice. The ‘knowing’ does not translate into ‘doing.’ If we examine the knowing–doing gap by taking a behavioural perspective, we notice three major psychological impediments that transformational experiments in government organizations have failed to deal with which are:

- Excessive reliance on strength of analysis and alternatives and taking motivation for granted.
- Cognitive dissonance in the face of large commitment and involvement.
- Inability to allocate leadership attention consistently over a period of time.

Firstly, transformational approaches rely primarily on the rationality and strength of the analysis and alternatives. When organizational members are high on motivation and are more oriented to ‘actor’ mindset, the strength of the argument is sufficient to elicit desired behaviour. Motivated and energetic employee groups would act quickly on an issue if they are convinced of the argument. But, as our earlier analysis indicates, the members of governmental organizations are more in the ‘spectator’ mode and are short on self-belief or self-efficacy. They are unlikely to be inspired to action merely by the power of logic underlying analysis and alternatives.

Secondly, transformational approaches have tended not to invest sufficient efforts in building ownership, involvement, and commitment of people at operating levels and getting them to initiate requisite actions to make changes happen. Large scale changes need major commitments of time, energy, and effort from organizational members for successful implementation. Any demand for big commitment from individuals tends to create cognitive dissonance in those individuals. Psychological studies show that people may be inclined to make small commitments. Over a period of time, they may be willing to enhance the size of commitments. But, a large and discontinuous demand right at the start, would actually create resistance to the idea as a result of cognitive dissonance and reinforce the ‘spectator’ mindset.

Thirdly, such large scale changes require substantial amount of resources to be committed. These are not just in terms of finances. A major requirement would be in terms of leadership attention consistently over a period of time to make changes happen. When the resources are spread too thinly over several efforts and there is no continuity of leadership attention and effort, changes do not succeed despite best intentions. Every change requires a certain minimum level of time, energy, and attention to succeed. If the interventions are not of the right dosage, the efforts may create a ‘flash in the pan,’ but no lasting change.

An informal assessment of some of the transformational change experiments conducted in government departments/organizations indicates that few of these have been able to graduate beyond Power Point presentations at senior levels. The actual implementation has been very weak. Officials at operating levels in these departments were found to continue in their ‘spectator’ mode, and were not even aware of the major points that have been raised and discussed in the strategic reviews of their department/organization.
Continuous Improvement Approach

As we have noted, when employees are low on skills, motivation, and self-esteem, strength of arguments does not necessarily lead to action. In such a scenario, everyone may agree with the issues but no one comes forward to initiate actions required. As a consequence, when the leaders or external consultants start the change campaign by defining the problem and planned strategy and back the proposed strategy with huge amount of data, the operating level officials at the receiving end tend to get entrenched in the roles of spectators or skeptics. As a result, implementation suffers. At the same time, it would not be realistic to assume that people would volunteer themselves for defining change initiatives or propose new strategies in an entrepreneurial fashion.

The technique of ‘foot-in-the-door’ would be helpful in such situations. This involves asking people to make small initial commitments. Small commitments lead to small wins. The small wins demonstrate to employees at operating levels that they can change certain things in the department or organization. When visible results flow from a number of small wins, a new sentiment is introduced into the system and this can precipitate changes in mindsets over time if the experimentation with core group approach is persisted with.

The continuous improvement approach has been tried out in certain departments of a state government in India. In these departments, a change agent of about 25 to 30 individuals were chosen through the process of peer group nominations. A cross-section of officials in these departments were asked to think and propose the names of a few individuals who appeared to be: (a) energetic; (b) credible; (c) having a good track record of performance; (d) skilled in working with people; and (e) capable of effectively catalysing the change process. About 100 to 120 officials were requested to send slips with four to six names anonymously.

On the basis of the nominations of colleagues, a core change agent group of about 25 to 30 individuals was constituted for each department. These core group members were called for a workshop with the key leaders of the department. They were expected to work on certain focus areas that meet the following criteria:

- Concern should be important, urgent, and compelling.
- It should have high potential pay-off in terms of service quality to citizens/other stakeholders.
- In the initial stages, the group should only take up short-term pay-off projects so that there are visible improvements in three to six months. It was felt that visible results would generate positive feelings not only among citizens/stakeholders but also among individuals and groups involved in the change effort. The reinforcement from success would be important to sustain the momentum.

The members of change agent group were provided some tools and techniques to aid their analysis and problem-solving. For example, the group members examined the reports generated at different levels within the department approval processes, meetings attended, and procedures or practices for various aspects. They did so by using collective subjective judgments of core group members. They raised questions on what aspects add cost and delays but had very little additional value. A half-day discussion on this broad area was found to be sufficient to clear at least some of the inevitable fat in the system that tends to accumulate over time. The key leaders made decisions on the spot on those issues.

In the same way, a format was developed for examining the interface with citizens/customers. This focused on those aspects involving cumbersome procedures, repeated visits, calling for information piecemeal, lack of acknowledgement, absence of time frames for decision-making, non-availability of officials for hearing grievances, and so on.

The core group also examined how it could recruit more individuals into the core group. There would be individuals with requisite enthusiasm and skills. There were discussions on how to identify them, induct them into the core group, and involve them in appropriate assignments. The general expectation was that the core group would keep expanding over time.

The core groups met formally as a total group once in two months. In the intervening period, informal meetings and implementation of core group decisions were expected to continue. The leadership of the department was expected to support the core group through active involvement, their own willingness to question the status quo, and take quick actions when individuals and groups came up with ideas and suggestions that were backed by convincing analysis.

When the core group workshops were held, the spontaneous enthusiasm that greeted acceptance of even small changes showed that even small successes provide impetus for further investment of efforts by people, because, successes, small or big, provide hope to members that
real changes are possible through efforts of officials at operating levels.

As the experiment described above is less than six months old, it is a little too early for a formal evaluation. But, as the experiment has been carried out in about ten departments and core groups in individual departments have met on more than one occasion, informal feedback is available and some basic conclusions are possible. The preliminary observations seem to indicate that certain factors emerged as critical for success of this approach which are as follows:

- motivation and commitment of core group members
- leadership to sustain hope
- framing of issues or organizing of events to aid problem-solving
- expanding core group
- defining the outputs and outcomes desired.

Motivation and commitment displayed by the core group members: It was observed that a key success factor was the presence of sufficient number of activists in the group who believed in making changes. When there are individuals who share common interest, it becomes easy to work together to make quick progress. When there were too few motivated and committed individuals, the group found it difficult to break free of the inertia plaguing the system. Thus, it is clear that, for the experiment to sustain itself, we need a certain minimum number of individuals who are ready to move away from spectator orientation and invest time, energy and effort to initiate changes in the department. These are individuals who do not consider their personal cost-benefit equation but act because they believe in the cause.

Leadership to sustain hope: Most of the core group members were willing to make initial investment of effort to come up with ideas and suggestions for change. But, these efforts had to translate into small wins so that their hopes could be sustained. The involvement of leaders and their willingness to decide quickly on acceptable ideas was an important factor in this regard. When leaders did not display much enthusiasm or interest, the core groups seemed to quickly lose their impetus for change. Thus, leaders play a key role in providing the core group members’ cognitive justification for continuing to make efforts. They keep alive the hope that changes can be made in this manner. Their action or inaction determines the credibility of the whole effort.

Framing of issues or organizing of events to aid problem-solving: Simple tools and techniques to structure the analysis and action planning process were found to be helpful in quickly achieving shared understanding of the problems and possible solutions. Similarly, when specific events like workshops, follow-up meetings or review sessions were scheduled, they served to provide a context for galvanizing people to action. The support for organizing events and providing tools for analysis was provided from outside the department.

Continuously expanding the core group: When more numbers could be added to the core group through network of attachments and acquaintances, the approach gains strength. This also leads to a more visible and a more positive shift in the mood within the larger department.

Clearly defining the outputs and outcomes desired: The core group approach is also expected to promote changes in attitude. Achievement is a product of competence and commitment. When leaders make active contribution to defining the priorities clearly in terms of outputs and outcomes desired, motivation of core group members is stimulated. This requires clearly articulating the projects with medium visibility, having worthwhile pay-off, and not demanding very high levels of effort. When there is a clear and specific demand, there is a spur for creating requisite capacity to meet that demand.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We started our discussions by examining the spectator and actor mindsets and noted that the mindsets in government organizations, particularly at operating levels, are characterized by spectator orientation. A study of the spectator mindset shows that it is rooted in certain factors such as:

- Excessively differentiated and rule-bound organization with too many free-riders.
- Hierarchical, impersonal, and non-appreciative superior-subordinate relationships.
- Getting work done through file movements, paper work, and reports with little attention to linkage, integration, and people management.
- Fragmentation and segmentation of roles and functions with no rewards for good performance or punishment for poor performance.

As Nobel Laureate Herbert Simon has noted, if we seek to understand the shape that jelly would take, it is important to examine the mould in which the jelly would be poured, rather than the jelly itself. In a similar vein, if we seek to get employees to move away from the specta-
tor orientation, there is a need to overhaul certain structures and systems in the government organizations. This is also borne out by international experiences. This change is not easy and requires agreement and commitment at the highest levels.

Changes have been attempted in certain government departments/organizations through, what has been termed in this paper as transformational approach. This approach is typically implemented with the help of external consultants. It takes a comprehensive look at the organization and suggests major changes. While there can be no disagreement on the desirability of these changes, the approach can leave the government officials in the role of spectators or skeptics. This is because the strong foundation of leadership and organization needed for making the changes succeed do not seem to exist in most government departments.

Another approach to change seeks to build around the continuous improvement efforts of change agents at operating levels. These core groups plan and make small changes actually happen with small investments of efforts. In the process, they demonstrate that changes are possible from within without additional resources and larger organizational changes. This approach too can be sustained only with certain critical success factors. It also remains to be seen whether the new mindset of ‘actor’ orientation can take root and become sufficiently strong over a period to initiate changes of larger magnitude.

Transformational change programmes are essential to make the government organization adapt to the changing requirements of the citizens and other stakeholders. They set the broad directions, and outline the strategies to be followed. These programmes however need to be supported by mobilization of people. Without appropriate mobilization of people, the transformational goal cannot be realized. As argued in this paper, the mobilization of people is best done through continuous improvement initiative.

It is not a good idea for the organization to spend too much time on incremental ideas and continuous improvement, but there is no attempt to look at the big picture. The changing environmental requirements demand a certain amount of transformational change and a total rethinking on certain key issues. Without these major changes, the organizational adaptation can suffer.

At the same time, if excessive attention is paid only to transformational change, and no effort is made to mobilize efforts at operating levels towards incremental changes, then we can have changes that look good on paper and in PowerPoint presentations, but which do not make the all-important transition from paper to practice. What works well is the right dose of both types of changes, mutually complementing and supporting each other.

To sum up, all the three approaches are important—larger structural changes, strategic change, and more modest changes in work processes. Each approach requires a certain set of factors to sustain it. Without those factors, initiating changes would be akin to tending roses in desert soil and desert climate.

Government organizations, particularly in developing countries like India, have a significant role to perform. Government officials have to provide service to the public in ways that are: (a) economical—of low cost; (b) efficient—maximizing outputs within budgets through good work practice; (c) effective—satisfying citizens/customers with their quality and timeliness; (d) ethical—fair and honest and friendly; (e) accountable to end users—open, keeping the public well informed; and (f) responsive—taking into account priorities of clients.

This requires the government officials to unlearn ‘spectator’ mindset and assume the ‘actor’ mindset. Some change levers that can contribute to changing the mindset have been discussed in this paper. But, the search for appropriate change levers, change strategies, and change practices to achieve the mindset change is far from over.
Note. This paper draws on different streams of management literature dealing with aspects of organizational change, organizational learning, organizational culture, and motivational issues particularly at the operating levels.

Organizational Change

Change Management in Government

Strategic Change vs Incremental Change

Motivation

Organizational Culture

Organizational Learning

S Ramnarayan, former Director of Centre for Organization Development, Hyderabad is currently the Workstream Leader in the Centre for Good Governance, Hyderabad. Prior to this, he had been on the faculty of Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, Tata Management Training Centre, Pune, and Weatherhead School of Management, USA(visiting). He has worked extensively with a number of private and state-owned enterprises, multinational enterprises, and international agencies on behavioural issues such as leadership and change management, organization development, and capability building. His publications include six books, six monographs, 35 papers in refereed journals, and about 15 cases.
e-mail: ram_cgg@rediffmail.com

The most striking thing about modern industry is that it requires so much and accomplishes so little. Modern industry seems to be inefficient to a degree that surpasses one’s ordinary powers of imagination. Its inefficiency therefore remains unnoticed.

*E F Schumacher*