

In a recent study, Assistant Professor Guo Xu, at the University of California (Berkeley) has assessed the performance of Indian and British district offices during the 1918 influenza pandemic.

For this he examined mortality records of 1,271 districts (towns) during 1910-25.

He found that death rates in these towns were nearly equal in towns led by Indian and British district officers before and after the Spanish flu pandemic. However, districts manned by Indian officers reported 15 percent fewer deaths, as compared to their British counterparts. Additionally, lower mortality rates were not related to differences in the qualifications or experience of Indian officers.

Furthermore, differences in mortality effects were not due to differences in hospital admissions, capacity, treatment success and expenditures during the pandemic

Covid 19: Importance of role-based tactics

years.

The Indian and the British district officers handled their task in different ways. The British officers went about their tasks by relying on rules, while the Indian officers adapted rules to the role they were expected to discharge.

The rule-based tactics are founded on the classical model proposed by German sociologist Mark Weber. In a 1953 study, Paul Appleby identified the following aspects of a rule-based approach - preferring "technique over purpose", always trying to find a "wholly scientific or technical and wholly right decision" and conceiving programme planning to be a "mechanical, merely technical, unvarying" activity.

On the other hand, the role-based approach is found-

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ed on the assumption that events in real-life are unpredictable and district officers make decisions under conditions of uncertainty and instability. This is more so in black swan events (rare occurrences), such as pandemics.

Past trends do not provide a reliable guide to the future. District offices have to manage the present as it unfolds or a cross the river by feeling the pebbles under one's feet.

Crossing a river by feeling the stones under one's feet requires small solutions.

Importantly, the touch of each stone provides feedback whether to place more weight on the stone or lift the leg and try to place the leg elsewhere. This is called the feedforward based on the information provided by the feedback.

Role-based district officers used such constant feedback to monitor external forces and change tactics mid-way during anti-pandemic operations. The British district officers were schooled in the rational method of decision-making and lacked capabilities



to move forward by feeling the stones in the river.

Thus, they were less successful in managing the 1918 flu-pandemic. If the feedback-feedforward framework is so important in decision-making in uncertain and unstable environments, then

how to make it operational in practice of administration?

In this book, planning theory for practitioners, Michael Brooks has developed the idea of "trial balloons". A trial balloon is an idea presented, or an action undertaken, for the express purpose of generating feedback.

Under conditions of uncertainty and instability, rarely, if ever, the district officers know with certainty what the single best course of action is with regard to a particular problem. Trial balloon is an explicitly experimental method to deal with uncertain and unstable environments.

While floating trial balloons, the district officer conceives each action as an experiment - as a means of getting more information about the effectiveness of a given course

of action. Decision-making then becomes a process of social experimentation where actions are tested and continuously assessed, against the possibilities and constraints of reality.

In trial balloon tactics, district officers have to get involved in messy reality connected with dealing with people and politics. This depends on how well they understand the intricacies of the circumstances and what is their role in managing them.

In order to understand the "messy" reality, the district officers have to keep their ears to the ground; develop a group with multidisciplinary skills as it is impossible for one person to unravel completely, understand a complex reality and know how future events are likely to unfold.

Following role-based tactics, district officers are able to respond to unforeseen changes that arise in the real world. The way to make decisions is to reduce the extent of analysis by examining only a limited number of alternatives. Here, issues are addressed individually by floating trial balloons, rather than in a holistic manner.

No visionary goals are set and the objective is to give small solutions to what are large more complex problems. When new problems arise, these are addressed through a new round of trial balloons. In this way faster decision-making happens which is also more politically relevant and people-centred as it has a short-term focus.

(Author has a PhD from the USA and a DLitt from Kanchi University. The article is based on his research and practice and views are personal)