

# The Administrator's Dilemma

Recent concerns raised by the political executive about the performance of bureaucrats, shows the enduring disquiet about their expectation of performance from civil servants.

This is not new.

The drive expected from the bureaucracy comes out clearly in Jawaharlal Nehru's address to the Fourth Annual General Body Meeting of the Institute of Public Administration: "In a period of dynamic growth, however, we want as civil servants persons who are not ..... merely head clerks but people with minds, people with vision, people with a desire to achieve, who have some initiative for doing a job and who can think how to do it. But the person who is completely neutral is a head clerk and no more ..... Can a person be neutral, I ask you, about basic things which we stand for, our state stands for, our Plan stands for ....."

Later, similar sentiments were echoed by Indira

Gandhi in her address to the Institute of Engineers - "unreserved faith in the programs they administer ..... We must all have a commitment to the development of the country and a sense of personal involvement with the welfare of our people".

**What are the reasons for such uneasiness by the top political executive?**

As early as the 1950s, some of the basic reasons were identified by Paul Appleby, an academic commissioned to study the Indian bureaucracy. He found that administrators preferred "technique over purpose", looked for a "wholly scientific or technical and wholly right decision", and conceived of programme planning to be a "mechanical, merely technical, unvarying" activity.

Later studies (e.g. Taub,

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Potter) have shown that administrators have, by and large, continued to follow these methods of working. This in the face of accumulating evidence that effective decision-making required peoples' participation, political engagement, program advocacy and willingness to innovate and adapt to local contextual conditions.

If bureaucrats have to meet expectations most of the time,

then they have to practice smart politics, find "champions for ideas", focus on citizen involvement, and follow up on implementation.

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Second, floating an idea is not enough and administrators have to go out and find support for their ideas because "no idea is good enough to succeed on the power of the idea alone". Ideas have to fit into ongoing development agendas, and

administrative responses have to be based on an understanding of what the political leaders and the citizens need and how to deliver on these.

During the process of championing ideas, relationships matter, and relationships mean emotions. And emotions are important because they lead to acceptance of new ideas by political stakeholders and citizens.

Third, effective citizen participation is required, especially in this internet-era of citizen involvement. This means respecting the decisions of the "publics" and learning to use citizen engagement opportunities to achieve goals. The standard way of citizen participation involves making people feel good by consulting them and seemingly listening to their concerns, but not taking their

views seriously or giving them opportunities to act on their own behalf.

However, real participation involves, "people who are organised and who become effective in rendering their environment relatively more malleable will begin to perceive themselves differently, as subjects not objects, as people who develop a vision of a better world and who can act coherently to achieve it".

Fourth, initiatives have to be developed and pursued because things don't get done on their own, and flexibility in making choices during implementation leads to goal-achievement.

A crucial element is listening and acknowledging others' ideas. Often, that will mean that others will be given credit for your work, but in the end one has the satisfac-

tion of knowing that the work was done well.

All in all, a talisman for consistently effective performance is as follows: The starting point is to decide on a course of action based on a careful analysis of alternatives and projections of probable impacts. After this, step away from technicalities and come to terms with political governance — working with political leaders, combining sound administrative practices and procedures with development agendas, introducing ideas at the right time and chasing goals.

Of course governance systems, values, and culture do vary in different states and within states, too. The good news is that it is possible to acquire these skills through constant practice.

*(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)*