

# Gauging performance of our civil servants

Paradoxically, greater accountability and transparency are not found to be primary performance drivers.

By R Balasubramaniam

The civil services day was celebrated on April 20 and 21 and in this year's celebration, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made an impassioned speech calling upon the bureaucrats to deliver on the mandate of governance. What stood out was his simplistic way of explaining how it was up to the political class to undertake 'reforms'; how the bureaucrats had to 'perform' and how both working together could 'transform' the nation.

Beyond the semantics, this clearly meant that the civil services must deliver. He gently pointed out how the civil servants need to go beyond mere 'outputs' and start to focus on the 'outcomes' of their actions. He asked them to expand their sense of accountability from beyond the CAG and to include the common Indian citizen too.

He also mentioned how a few bureaucrats had limited the use of social media to mere self-aggrandisement and how it could be more efficiently and effectively used for doing public good.

The dictionary defines 'performance' as an action, task or operation, seen in terms of how successfully it was performed and most of us have a tacit knowledge of performance. We can recognise and understand that something is indeed working as it should be, and learn from a very young age to appreciate performance and quality.

How does one translate this tacit understanding into something more structured and measurable? Can one measure performance in the public sector and of public functionaries? One can learn from the private sector that has taken the lead in assessing performances of individuals, teams and entire organisations.

The public sector is very diverse in the context in which it operates, has egalitarian objectives and is funded by taxation revenues. Hence, civil servants need to be more accountable and transparent but paradoxically, one does not find these as the primary drivers of performance. By the very nature of having unlimited resources at its disposal, the public sector also tends to become inefficient and opaque over time.

This very complexity has incentivised the system into taking the easier approach of limiting the measurement to simpler variables like compliance to the instructions of the political bosses, absence of any controversial decision making, numerical achievements in terms of beneficiaries reached, and budget expended.

Demanding performance of oneself and an organisation is a very exacting process that requires discipline, determination and a strong political will to undertake. It requires not just managerial knowledge but a visionary leadership that is constantly

evaluating, refining and improvising processes all the time.

Performance processes normally fail because the required discipline and rigor wanes over time — one must have the patience and the perseverance to allow the system to mature for results to be produced.

Measuring performance is not like instant coffee — made quickly and giving immediate gratification. These systems take time to initiate, evolve, mature and become organisational culture.

Leadership needs to be constant, consistent and serious till the entire cycle has taken root. It also needs mentoring support from experts who are willing to not only design a review process but also facilitate its implementation in the initial phases.

The core leadership should take it as sacred responsibility and be willing to make public disclosure of achievements or variances. One must have public displays of the review process and all stakeholders should have a say in not just the design but also in the actual framing and implementation of the reviews. Reward and punishment behaviours are indeed critical for human performance and public agencies should move away from not wanting to indulge in them.

## Normative feeling

There is a normative feeling that public jobs are sort of permanent and career growth is not necessarily dependent on performance. One must communicate that 'mediocrity' need not necessarily be synonymous with 'public agencies' and a culture of valuing performance should be created. This can be done only when good performance is rewarded and poor one punished.

Moving towards more qualitative indicators in line with what the prime minister is demanding will necessitate major paradigm shifts in the mindset of not just the bureaucrats and the political system but also in the way the common man views the civil servants and their performance.

Performance, when measured with the attitude of seeing the bureaucrat as a 'public servant' being paid out of taxation revenues will be totally different from that of seeing them as 'elite officers' overseeing service delivery functions.

But can the officers of our civil services, who over the decades have got used to operating with neither transparency nor public accountability be willing to subject themselves to a complete shift in mindset? Will Modi be able to push through reforms and make social audits and 'citizen initiated performance measurement' of civil servants a norm rather than the exception?

If he and his intent can translate into concrete action and result in these paradigmatic shifts, then one can be sure that the much-touted reforms coupled with the performance of a vibrant and energetic bureaucracy will spearhead the rising of a 'new India'.

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