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COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Of late the management literature has started stressing the importance of competency development in enhancing the competitiveness and performance of an organisation. The country's civil service as an organisation needs an exacting set of core competencies and core values to prove effective in different arenas of public administration. Not only the professional knowledge but also proper understanding and adept handling of dynamics of people's problems are equally significant. One may count a number of individual practices that are involved in competency development, in the particular context of civil service, the relation between these practices and how they are underlined and enhanced, assumes greater importance. This article is divided into two parts: in first part, competency framework is discussed in general terms and in second part the strategies to enhance the competencies of the civil servants are discussed.

CIVIL SERVICES are facing various challenges in India as well as in other developing countries since early 1990's, especially due to the onset of processes of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. It is a well-known fact that the modern permanent civil service in India, established in 1854, was the result of Macaulay Committee report that recommended for merit based selection through a competitive examination, but candidates' first degree was to be obtained in arts from Oxford or Cambridge University. Subsequently in 1922 Indian Civil Service examination was held in India. There are various theories of public administration, both Indian and Western, but actual practices are more important than the theories. We tend to agree with R.D. Lang who perceptively remarks: "We do not need theories as much as the

*Views expressed in this article are personal to the author

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experience that is the source of theory." And undoubtedly practices require change in models in a particular time and place. Mahatma Gandhi rightly observed: "You must be the change you wish to see in the world."

The famous scholar Paul H. Appleby¹ has identified following attributes of a good administrator:

- (a) willingness to assume responsibility
- (b) a steadily enlarging ability to deal with more problems
- (c) a strong bent towards action
- (d) a good listener
- (e) effective with people
- (f) capacity to build his own strength by building the competence of his organisation
- (g) capacity to use his institutional resources
- (h) avoiding using power/authority for his own sake
- (i) welcoming reports of troublesome things
- (j) a good team worker
- (k) a good initiator.

In June 2006, Cabinet Secretary of UK, Sir Gus O' Donnell, talked of creating a culture of excellence for 21st century civil service:

- (i) that is valued by ministers, and recognised as a superb source of expert, objective policy advice by external bodies and internationally;
- (ii) delivering world class, customer-focused services, day-in, day-out, frequently in partnership;
- (iii) hungry to learn from the best examples of change, and with the confidence and skills to apply what they learn;
- (iv) attracting the best talents from every area of society;
- (v) honest, objective and impartial, and to act with integrity;
- (vi) proud of and passionate about their work, committed to do speedily and with right professional skills; and
- (vii) commanding the confidence and respect of the public.

Undoubtedly these lofty ideals are worth practicing in Indian context too.

Often it is said that after joining civil services most of the officers stop reading and learning, and only three books are found in their houses: railway time table, civil list and That is to say, they do not grow and change with the time, though change is the law of nature. This allegation is only

¹Paul H. Appleby, "Public Administration for A Welfare State", 1961.

²GOI, "Second Administrative Reforms Commission Tenth Report: Refurbishing of Personnel Administration, Scaling New Heights", Department of Administrative Reforms, New Delhi, 2008.

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partly true in the sense that there are three types of civil servants in this regard: *First*, those who do not read and learn; *second*, those who read and learn only about the subjects they deal with; and *third*, those who read and learn about everything they can – going beyond their career and developing hobbies about art, literature, culture, education, health, photography, etc. The number in first category is relatively more and that in the third category is the least. The continuous and regular process of reading and learning is required for enhancing the capability of the civil servants through sharpening of the existing skills and acquiring of new skills (innovations) that have proved effective in different arenas of public administration. Not only the professional knowledge but also the proper understanding and adept handling of dynamics of people's problems are equally significant because practice is not more important than the people.

TABLE 1: CORE COMPETENCIES AND CORE VALUES
FOR EFFECTIVE CIVIL SERVANTS

Core competencies	Core values
1. 'What to do' competencies: i. Clear Mission & Vision ii. Prioritisation of tasks iii. New initiatives & innovations – learning from experiences & scaling-up of successes iv. Goal-orientation-outcome, not merely the processes v. People-centric – 'the last man' vi. Inspiring leadership	1. Integrity – public service above personal interests 2. Commitment to the profession & people at large 3. Willingness & passion to serve the people at large 4. Neutrality & objectivity – decision based on evidence / facts 5. Anonymity – not expressing views in public 6. Idealism & sensitivity 7. Creativity 8. Optimism – not to be afraid of failures, rather learning from failures 9. Impartiality – (without favour / disfavour) decision as per merit irrespective of government, party in power and the persons affected.
2. 'How to do' competencies: i. transparency ii. team work / horizontality iii. complementarity iv. organisation & method v. regular supervision & monitoring vi. accessibility to people vii. appropriate technology viii. responsiveness ix. flexibility	
3. 'Why to do' competencies: i. accountability ii. service to the nation/society iii. self-satisfaction & self-motivation iv. adherence to constitution and laws of the land	

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However, it is a necessary duty, not a sufficient condition, for effective public administration. For effective civil servants following core competencies and core values are necessary (Table 1).

Thus we see that both the core competencies and core values are required to be holistic. First and foremost every civil servant should be clear about the mission and vision of an organisation / department where he is posted at a particular time and place. Mission usually refers to the *raison d'être* of the organisation, that is, the general purpose or reason why it was created. In other words, the mission statement is, by and large, what it tries to achieve at present in broader terms, its basic values and policies. On the other hand, vision is more specific and refers to what it might become in future, hence the desired goal is tangible, achievable in a particular time frame. Closely related to the vision is, what Hamel and Prahalad call 'strategic intent', meaning leveraging 'internal resources, capabilities and core competencies' to fulfil goals in the competitive environment.³ Often a clearly defined and updated mission and vision are missing in many public sector organisations/government departments. Hence for a public administrator / manager, it is the most important task to know his organisation / department's mission and vision, and if these are not clearly defined, get them defined or if already defined somehow get them redefined in the changing context.

Undoubtedly when an organisational vision is widely shared and properly inspired, it takes that organisation to new heights of success in range and depth and nothing succeeds like success. When Kurien took over the reigns of Gujarat milk producers cooperative federation (which was in doldrums then), he first and foremost defined its mission and vision in terms of increasing milk production and collection, through mobilisation of farmers, ensuring fair and reasonable price to milk producers, quality of products, hygiene, appropriate collection and distribution chain, etc. After he succeeded in his mission and vision, he scaled-up and started processing of milk products – from Amul milk and ghee to Amul chocolates. Finally, he brought 'White revolution' in Gujarat and inspired others to spread this to almost all the regions of India. Thus he became an institution-builder. Sheo Basant (IAS) took creative and critical inspiration from him and turned around the ailing Comfed (Cooperative Milk Producers' Federation), Bihar through its brand name 'Sudha'. Kurien had asked all state governments that a Cooperative Milk producers' Federation be headed by an IAS officer and secondly his/her tenure should be stable (two-three years). Most of the state governments

³G. Hamel and C.K. Prahalad, "Strategic Intent", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 67, No.3, 1989.

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agreed to this and, lo and behold, it has succeeded like anything all over India.

The question arises as to why on most of the posts often right persons are not posted, and often their tenure lasts for a few months, especially in Hindi speaking states. There is another trend in U.P: if BSP government comes to power, it transfers higher officers *en masse* and shunts all such officers posted on plum posts by the previous SP Government and *vice versa*. It transpires that the conception of 'committed bureaucracy' is ruling the roost more often in the different corridors of power during different regimes. When a minister chooses senior officers to be posted in his ministry, it can be easily imagined what will be its implications both implicit and explicit. Undoubtedly the 'transfer-posting industry' has been flourishing in many states in India, especially since 1980's. This has cemented the nexus of public representatives, bureaucrats, technocrats, contractors and suppliers resulting into corruption; for example, when a PWD Minister in U.P inaugurated a bridge in 2011, it fell down partially within a few days. Less than two years' tenure is damaging the system very much because an officer takes about six months to understand the problems / issues at hand for any post. Auction of some posts in district administration has enhanced corruption many fold. A few years back, Supreme Court ordered that police officers should be given a minimum term of two years but the same was not done for civil administrators, hence regulation and development functions do suffer due to frequent transfers and postings. However, even police officers are transferred frequently in U.P. In this regard postings in Central Government are usually not disturbed till completion of the fixed term.

II

Strategies for Enhancing Competencies

The famous management scholar Stephen Covey, in his book "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People", talked of the following:

be proactive-take responsibility, begin with end in mind, put first things first, think win-win – mutual benefit in all human transactions, seek first to understand, then to be understood, synergize –seek creative cooperation, and sharpen the saw. These are equally significant points for the civil servants.

However, the following specific strategies may be adopted for enhancing competencies of civil servants:

First, a trend of post-retirement absorption /employment is alarmingly increasing. Many senior officers indulge in pleasing the power-that-be by

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bending the rules and regulations (trading *quid pro quo*). It is interesting to note that during 1998-2012 out of eleven retired Secretaries of DOPT (GOI), ten were immediately absorbed at important posts – the last one could not be adjusted because Shunglu Committee inquiry into irregularities of Commonwealth Games 2010 (he was its member) pointed out gross irregularities (*Indian Express*, 11 July 2012). Undoubtedly some organisations get benefited by the rich experiences of retired civil servants, but many of them are absorbed more for accommodation than for significant contribution to the organisation. Actually 'individual return' is much higher there than the 'social return'. Hence it should be rigorous and selective and that, too, after a gap of two years from retirement. Further, there should be a paradigm shift towards 'agency' work culture with specific tasks, service delivery in time, more accountability, innovation and better risk management as European experience shows.

Second, in-service training courses / modules should be more engaging, focused, interactive, dialogical, creative, pragmatic, issue-based and adaptable. Further the mode of imparting skills should be primarily based on experiential case studies from different contexts and arenas. Field visits are quite useful for sharing experiences and successes. Different state government / PSUs should encourage exchange programmes of officers for sharing of challenges about turning the crises into opportunities. Every officer after training should implement at least one project (with scope of new skills' application) of his choice in next one year and should be in constant interaction with the concerned institution for sharpening of his skills and realising of aspirations. Needless to say that the conventional teaching is different from professional training because while the former is based on teacher-centred 'instruction' paradigm (atomistic), the latter is based on participant learner-centred 'learning to do' paradigm (holistic). Trainers should be proactive facilitators to develop learners' competencies in real sense.

Third, short-term, medium term and long term goals should be defined and constantly redefined with the changing time for the growth of organisation's mission and vision. Hence various skills of what to do, when to do, why to do and how to do are to be pursued creatively and critically in different time frames. Obviously prioritisation of tasks, their scheduling / rescheduling and performance are essential. Prioritisation helps not only in differentiating and separating grain from the chaff but also makes easier to identify one's errors and blunders, rethink and perform alternatively. Avoiding pending work for next day keeps one right on track with right pace. Clear timelines and milestones (monthly, quarterly and annual) should be appropriately fixed and regular monitoring should be done in order to adhere

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to those. Civil services are often blamed for red-tapism (delay), hence quick decisions should be taken by higher ups at right time. Indecisiveness and indifference cause various problems of denied justice, de-motivation and user dissatisfaction. Unfortunately, some senior officers categorise files into two categories; *abhi nahin* ('not doing now') and *kabhi nahin* ('never doing')! But they try to hide their weaknesses by recording queries time and again and bullying if juniors respond with quick replies on files. Short-term goals should be attempted through time management for better workflow ('time and tide wait for none'). Small successes should also be celebrated in order to take the entire team with high spirit towards achieving medium and long term goals. Many European countries have turned towards outcome-oriented priorities, called SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Results-focused and Time bound). Indian civil servants should adapt this in essence.

Fourth, team management is very crucial in effective performance because the whole is always more than the sum total of parts. Further effective team does not suffer from the internal divisions, factions, sectional interests and fissions. Effective team reduces weaknesses and enhances strengths. It is quite easy for a team to have a regular SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity and threat) or SWOC (strength, weakness, opportunity and challenge) analyses to bring change and scaling up of successes. Teamwork either does not give any scope for diversions, digressions and conflicts or it nips these in the bud due to collective synergy. Teamwork enhances the desired speed, self-motivates as well as makes results visible both in quantity and quality. In civil services still the gap between senior, middle and junior officers is quite substantial. Inertia is the prerogative of many officers. Often the senior officers ask the middle / junior officers to put up a desired and comfortable note to suit the power-that-be. If undesired note is put up, through queries or techniques of 'please discuss' or 'please speak', the said note is diluted. Right to Information Act (2005) has given certain degree of openness, yet still a desired note is dictated from above. Otherwise middle / junior officers suffer in due course. Hence it is the need of the hour to have a shared, communicative, and transparent team functioning. Empowering each other should be the motto of the team—putting right person at right job would be real team empowerment and it will increase efficiency and effectiveness.

Fifth, civil servants should be given performance-based incentives. Government of India is probably considering to link variable pay to targets and cost savings:

- (a) no incentives if less than 70 per cent targets are met;
- (b) no incentives if more than 70 per cent targets are met but zero

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cost savings; and

- (c) achieving all targets to get 15 per cent of cost savings.

Actually Fourth Central Pay Commission recommended variable increments to reward better performance by civil servants. Fifth Central Pay Commission went further to recommend extra increments for exceptionally meritorious performers and denial of regular increments for under-performers. Similarly Sixth Central Pay Commission talked of PRIS (Performance Related Incentive System) – a monetary perk in addition to salary. This will enhance accountability. Prajapati Trivedi, Secretary, Performance Management in Cabinet Secretariat (Government of India) rightly says, "Officers can't be expected to perform better if they are constantly berated... We can have the world's best evaluation systems, but if we don't have an incentive system, I am afraid we can't improve performance."⁴ However, two caveats are significant here: *first*, often a project takes more than one year; *two*, often one policy decision is related to and affects many departments. Then how to rate that? These aspects should be taken into account.

Sixth, often senior civil servants are criticised and harassed without any rhyme or reason. Media often denigrate them as 'babus'! Higher civil servants are recruited in an open system based on merit and performance (with some concessions to reserved categories) through a tough competition, hence they are not simply clerks (as 'babu' means). Further often print and electronic media publish unverified 'stories' about various events in a distorted or coloured manner blaming the civil servants in absolute terms. This often leads to the deterioration of law and order situation or taking wrong side by the public on important issues. This trend is to be corrected. —Further they are often victims of 'privileges' of Parliamentarians / legislators as well as that of 'contempt of court'—both are primarily undefined, hence at any moment for anything civil servants may be harassed and victimised. Many public representatives often humiliate them in public and blame or abuse them even for policy paralysis which is the prerogative of the political executive and higher civil servants only assist them in this regard as the Secretary is only the 'principal advisor' to the Minister. Many High Courts often scold the senior civil servants in courts and verbally order them to comply with their verbal directions otherwise they are threatened to be sent to jail (some officers were sent to jail for omissions and commissions of their political bosses). These tendencies de-motivate and demoralise the civil services as a whole. The present system does not

⁴Vikas Dhoot, "Babu's Pay May Be Linked to Performance Finally", *The Economic Times*, 9 July, 2012.

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allow civil servants an open space to put forward their views, opinions and concerns in public, hence there is often a gap between appearance and reality to say the least. This gap is to be bridged at the earliest.

Finally, there is much euphoria for public-private partnership (PPP). This is a euphemism for enhancing the interests of the contractors, suppliers, business houses and industrialists. This has not succeeded in rural areas, remote hill areas and inaccessible backward areas where the private sector (in essence, contractors) are not willing to work because it is not lucrative, not giving as much profit as urban industrial area gives. Actually what is required is communities and citizens' partnership in government policies at different levels (from formulation to evaluation). Action research, participatory rapid action (PRA), rapid rural survey, clients' survey, people's advisory committees, peace committees (for law and order), citizen's charter, etc. ensure participation of local communities and citizens. Sensitive civil servants are required to visit the common people, listen to their views, share their experiences about proposed schemes, redefine/ reformulate the schemes, and should take feedback on continuing schemes in order to ensure right policy decisions and better implementation. This genuine participation will also reduce costs due to better use of local resources, and upgrade the quality of works, as well as timely completion of schemes / projects. Civil servants should realise that ultimately the people's satisfaction is most important because they are users and only they can maintain the new works if genuinely involved from the very beginning in a transparent manner. This will also ensure reduction of corruption (cuts / percentage) at different levels. And for this civil servants have to change their attitude and aptitude – sooner the better.

It is hereby concluded that competencies of civil services are to be enhanced through different strategies for achieving outcome orientation (service delivery in time, people's well-being is to be the ultimate goal, and creative partnership) in a proactive manner. Change is to come both from within the civil services and from without at the earliest in order to empower the people at large.

A SELECT READING

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