

STRATEGIES OF SUCCESSFUL ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS

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Summary

The quest for efficiency, effectiveness and economy has been the dominant impetus to the current administrative reforms and re-engineering in many countries. The reforms offered management practices and advocated smaller and less intrusive government in place of larger and more interventionist government. The reforms proposed to alter public administration to management, shifting the focus from inputs to outputs and outcomes. The emphasis on achieving effective outcomes induced a move towards devolution, decentralization, and contracting out. The reforms intended to change the “culture” of public administration to new public management. This culture has taken root in developed countries and is spreading in developing countries. International donors placed some pre-conditions for reforms. In essence, however, the change appears to be more structural rather than functional.

In a way the legitimacy of the public service is lessened due to cuts in size and allocations for welfare, but in another way it is broadened for its new orientation towards the participation of the customers and citizens.

The positive achievements of the reforms are: decentralization, downsizing, cutting red tape, Human Resource Management (HRM), more responsiveness of the higher civil service to the elected and appointed officials, merging policy and operations, changes in budgeting systems and performance measurement etc. But the strategies of reform are not that successful in regard to: democratization, equity, empowering employees, greater autonomy, public accountability, social welfare, managing for outcomes, regulation and control. Thus, the overall assessment of reforms is mixed.

1. Introduction

Most of the countries in the world, irrespective of their ideologies and levels of development, have been under a reform process during the last three decades. The role of the state in these countries came under attack, to a large extent due to certain historical situations that emerged during this period. In the context of liberalization and globalization, governments in most countries are called upon to reform and re-engineer their administrative apparatus in pursuit of good governance. There have been periodic efforts for administrative reform, based upon the recommendations of autonomous Administrative Reforms Commissions consisting of quasi-political and non-bureaucrat members. This chapter does not attempt to discuss the success or failure of past reforms. Instead, it traces the strategies adopted in recent reforms.

2. Administrative reforms

Administrative reforms enjoyed significant support in Europe, the USA, Australia and New Zealand during the 1990s. They permeated Latin America, entered Asia and have very recently penetrated Africa. These reforms are aimed at a major transformation of the ideals and practices of traditional civil services. These efforts have been deliberate, and designed towards a desired change. However, devising strategies for successful implementation of major administrative reforms is not an easy task for bringing wide-ranging changes in well entrenched and tradition-bound public administration, particularly in the developing countries.

It is observed that two institutions, namely unaccountable Big Business and indifferent Big Government, caused most concern to society. There has been universal unhappiness with the prevailing administrative systems in general. Public institutions created during colonial regimes failed to keep abreast with the changing times. In response to this fall from public grace, since the mid-1980s there has been a common trend in many of the industrialized countries to redefine the role of the state and public administration. Several aid-giving bodies like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Commonwealth and the United Nations commissioned studies and recommended a number of strategies for administrative reforms. They include: “liberalization, deregulation, downsizing the public sector, shrinking bloated public organizations, privatization, debureaucratisation, civil services reform, budget reform, performance measures, business like management, long-term transparency, computerization, and mechanization, and greater productivity, efficiency and accountability”.

Their agenda had many targets, including government as an economic manager and the role of the state in society. The civil service was singled out and accused of many

shortcomings, such as being bloated, expensive, unresponsive, deliberately resistant to changes and incapable of dealing with new challenges. In short, the civil service lacked the ability to focus on clients and manage operations efficiently, and to provide sound and unbiased policy advice. It was thought to sabotage new programs, and undermine attempts at major policy choices and administrative reforms in general. Thus, the fundamental task of a reformer is to regain control over the public sector and exercise greater control over the broad public policy agenda. The politicians made it clear that they wanted doers not thinkers. They felt that they themselves had the policy answers. Officials understood the message and developed a tendency to recommend safe policy options and what “politicians would wear”. As such, in effect the senior civil service has been the target of administrative reform.

3. Politics of reform

“Failure to understand the political nature of administrative reform and to develop a political strategy to overcome resistance lies behind the failure of many reform attempts”. The pre-requisites of reform include political will and a strategy of implementation. The politics of reform cannot be overlooked in any analysis of administrative reform.

One of the major differences between the administrative reforms of the past and the present is that in the past it was a specific task of a particular country. The reform in the past was generally to repair administrative machinery as recommended by expert bodies. These efforts were resisted initially by the bureaucracy and the organized unions, but later accepted after consultation and negotiation. However, such reforms were only successful in tinkering with the structure of administrative organizations. They were half-hearted, and the governing elite, particularly the ruling political parties, never seriously insisted on the successful implementation of reforms. But present reforms are completely different, and appear to be “episodic”, aiming at “reorganization” and “re-engineering” of public administration. These do not pertain to a simple administrative system of a single country. It is a world-wide phenomenon, mainly suggested by international organizations based on principles of new economics fully supported by almost all political parties and groups, including the trade unions. There is not much resistance from any particularly known quarter; it seems appreciated by the people at large.

Reforms of the 1980s and 1990s are essentially a deliberate attempt to use political power to influence the change of goals, structure and processes of state bureaucracy. At the outset, reforms seem to be wide-ranging, involving a major shakeup in administrative organizations to remedy the malfunctioning of traditional processes. But an in-depth analysis reveals the dominance of neo-liberal economics over politics. The intensity of change in fact, is indeed more political and economic than administrative. The strongest political impulse for every phase of administrative reform came from the “new right”, while defenders of the old order had themselves been weakened and divided. The new right criticized the existing old order on at least six counts:

- The state, in dealing with the powerful interest groups (especially trade unions), contributed to higher public spending than the median voter would have supported.
- Public officials were mainly concerned with the maximization of their own budgets and status.
- The professions were regarded as self-interested monopolists, restricting the supply of their services, demanding higher salaries and pursuing their own professional ends, rather than responding to users of their services.
- The growth of government undermined the freedom of the individual. “Big Government” sapped the entrepreneurial spirit of the citizen and the sense of self-reliance.
- Center-Left governments mistakenly pursued artificially egalitarian notions of social justice, which undermined individual freedom and the fiscal self-discipline of the state.
- The expansion of the public sector had stunted private sector growth.

Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s repeatedly expressed their anti-state stand. Different anti-state theories were fed to the political masters in different countries through a variety of right wing “think-tanks” which influenced policy formulation. While there may not be any particular anti-state theory, dependence upon market forces and practices is clearly noticeable.

In the past, despite the intellectual attacks and public criticism against the maladies of public bureaucracy, ruling political parties and their leaders never seriously condemned bureaucracy. But now it is well known that the leading politicians in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and other countries have been openly hostile to state bureaucracy. “Bureaucratic bashing” by political leaders has become a common tactic to denigrate public employees and generate public support to win elections.

The present assault on the public services led to radical pro-market reforms in downsizing the public sector and transforming public services on the lines of business enterprise. It facilitated the expansion of political control over public bureaucracy, and enabled the introduction of reforms and re-engineering techniques used in the private sector.

4. Characteristics of reforms

Administrative reform is classified into three categories:

- Those that turn out to be strictly tied to and shaped by a simultaneous constitutional revision;
- Those encouraged by economic models, promoted in particular by the desire to open up public service to the logic of the market or to connect the provision of public service to the financial needs of the state; and
- Those encouraged by renewed attention to the rights of each citizen, considered to be an aware and sovereign subject, who looks to the administration for the satisfaction of his or her individual needs.

Six essential challenges have been perceived in this context:

- The managerial challenge (process);
- The challenge of quality (3 E's: efficiency; economy and effectiveness);
- The democratic challenge (friendly with citizens);
- The challenges of professionalism (policy and operation expertise);
- The challenges of responsibility (limit public spending, re-design the welfare state); and
- The challenges of decentralization (closer to citizens).

It is argued that two swings, one upward from national governments to international organizations, and the other downward from national governments to grass-roots non-governmental organizations, are the keys to understanding the challenges that confronted public administration in the 1990s.

5. Approaches to reforms

Based on the solutions offered by the international bodies like the IMF, World Bank, United Nations and Commonwealth Secretariat and others, to the ills afflicting the civil service systems all over the world, a number of approaches are adopted to bring improvements in the efficiency, effectiveness and performance in the public sector: a citizen's charter, re-engineering, reinventing government, New Public Management, privatization, financial reforms, democratization, and decentralization.

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Biographical Sketch

Bhaskara Rao Vasireddy, was born in September 1939. He has a Ph.D from Osmania University, Hyderabad, India. He retired as Professor in Public Administration from Kakatiya University, India, after 40 years of teaching experience, 35 years of research and 25 years administration. He guided 6 MPhils and 10 PhDs, and he has published 70 articles and 30 books. He participated in 80 seminars. He was Secretary to the New Public Administration Society of India. He translated some of the works of Noam Chomsky, and is a biographer of Charlie Chaplin.

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