

Management of Change in Government

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Introduction

We live in a world of swift changes. Almost every day our society grows more complex, particularly as new technologies and changing demographics strain the old social system. Faced with changing citizens' needs and requirements, increasing public demands for better service, more and more governments have recognised the need to change the way they organise and operate to deliver the highest quality service to internal and external customers. Many governments are falling behind in the effort to keep up with the demand for their services.

All over the world, and more particularly in developing countries like India, changes are taking place rapidly. Often these changes are mismanaged because of inexperience or lack of skills. When this happens, expected benefits do not accrue and cynicism sets in. The management of change, therefore, is one of the vital functions of senior government functionaries.

Business organisations have started to adapt to these change by reducing their reliance on managerial authority, formal rules and procedures, and narrow divisions of work. And they are creating task forces, teams, sharing information and delegating responsibility and accountability far down the hierarchy. While a few progressive business corporations are building new partnerships with workers and their unions to meet these challenges, much of the government departments and public sector undertakings continue to operate under the old command-and-control management system, which is built on hierarchy and rules.

Today, for the typical front-line public employee to resolve an on-site problem or perform a function outside the rules and regulations, he or she must first seek approval from a supervisor who is frequently far removed from the actual work place. And that's not all. The immediate supervisor often must go through more channels until a higher-up signs the proverbial 'form in triplicate.' Not only are workers stifled and demoralised by such a system; the public also loses confidence when workers who know how to get the job done are saddled by a burdensome, costly and inefficient bureaucracy. Front-line employees in both the public and private sectors must adapt quickly to these changes. They must manage new technologies, perform increasingly complex tasks, assume new responsibilities and fine-tune their work for the changing needs of the public. Today's society demands efficiency, expects competence and has little tolerance for waste.

Forces for Change

A persistent problem for public managers is to identify and act on opportunities to improve quality and efficiency in government. Unlike private companies, government departments do not have the constant pressure of generating profits and building market share. In the private sector, market forces normally stimulate change and discipline organisational performance. But in contrast, absence of strong external pressures such as budget crisis or breakdown in service delivery which sometimes prompt urgent re-examination of government practices, it is difficult for public

managers to focus attention on or motivate changes in how departments perform their daily tasks.

The issue is organisational renewal: spurring innovation not to institute wholly new services, but to make existing government functions operate better, faster, more cheaply. Public departments do not ask such questions frequently enough, nor are they good at mobilising commitment and resources to implement needed changes.

As shown in the Figure 1, there are certain environmental forces driving the need for change in government. These include Rising Public Expectations, Globalisation, Fiscal Pressures and Decentralisation.

Rising Public Expectations

The challenge of meeting rising public expectations in the context of decreasing public expenditures is significant for many governments. The public has come to expect better quality and more accessible public services from government. Because of these higher expectations and the fact that there are simply not enough resources, government is challenged to do more with less by allocating resources more suitably and making better use of them.

Most countries are under increasing pressure from the public. This is primarily due to developments in technology and communication (citizens are better informed and expect quicker services); education (citizens are more discerning); secularisation (citizens are more individualistic and critical); and wealth accumulation (citizens have the means to exact the level of service they feel they deserve, as well as to pursue alternative service delivery options). Citizens want to have their say in the way the public administration is run and expect the best services at the lowest prices.

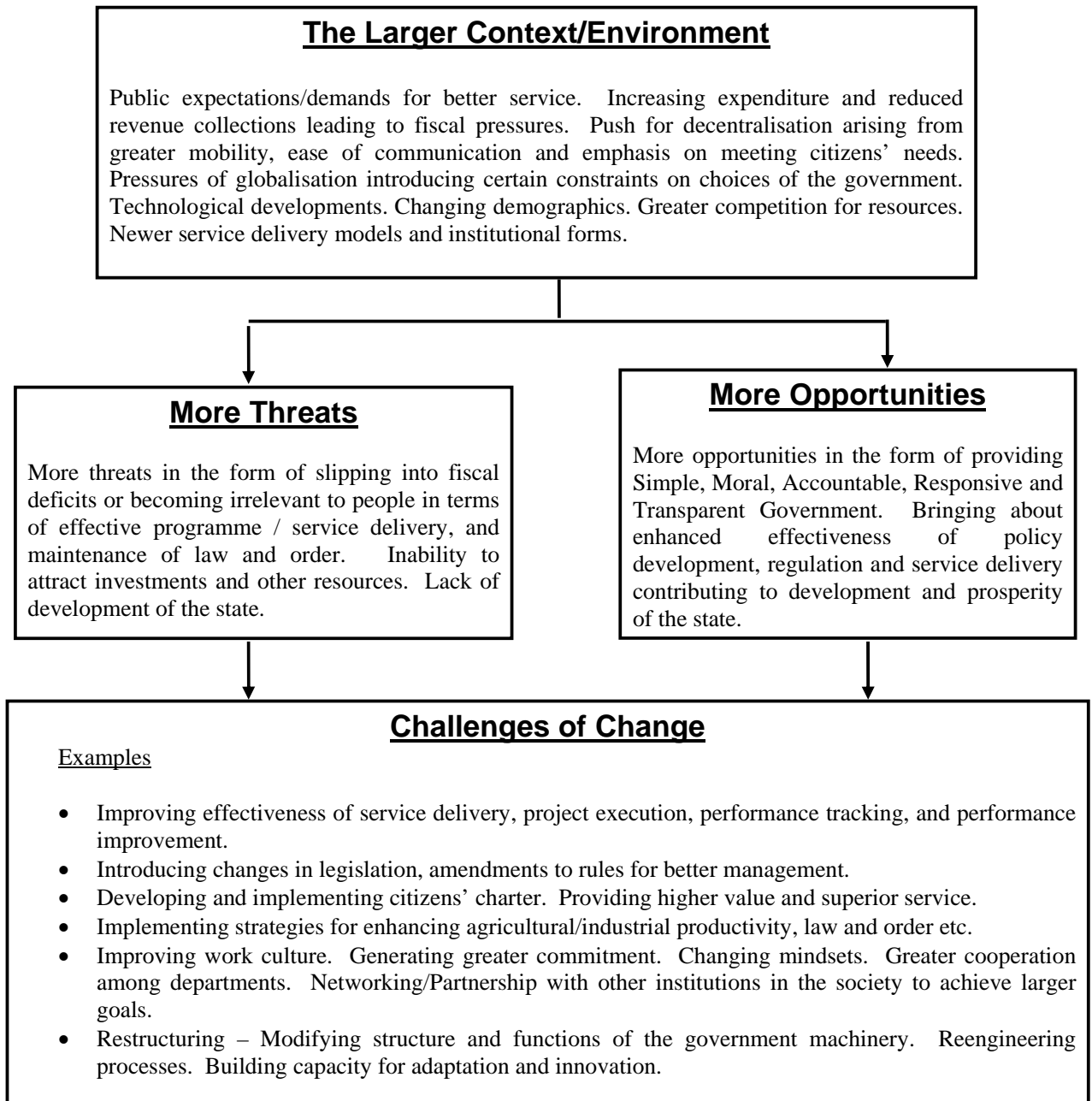


Figure 1: Forces driving the need for change in Government

Today governments face an array of challenges, including transition to a knowledge-based economy, rapid technological advances, and changing demographics. These challenges require a fundamental re-examination of the government's priorities, processes, policies, and programme to effectively address shifting public expectations, needs, and fiscal pressures. A mixture of critical resources is needed for the government to better deliver public services. As the public expects demonstrable results from the government, government leaders need to increase strategic planning, address management challenges and high-risk issues, use integrated approaches, enhance their departments' results orientation, and ensure accountability.

Globalisation: Globalisation has an impact on most dimensions of government administration in most countries, and constrains the ability of governments to act independently. Gone are the days when major decisions on the extent and the manner of government intervention could be taken in isolation without considering their reverberations to and from the outside world.

Fiscal Pressures: Fiscal pressures result because government budgets seem perpetually tight. Demands for services always seem to outstrip the available resources/revenues. Those who want government to do more recognise that it must do what it does now – but do it better. Everybody wants government to sharpen its focus on producing results that matter for public and their families in large. Fiscal pressures demand better performance from government with fewer resources. Many government departments are struggling to meet citizens' demands for better quality of service and low cost of operations. They are constantly under pressure to “do more with less.” However, it is still widely believed that, for sustained economic growth and financial stability over the long term, fiscal discipline must be maintained. The public debt remains too high. The opening of financial markets and the resulting “globalisation,” too, are generating new pressures: more than ever before, governments must compete with one another for foreign investments, and to be competitive they must have low inflation and stable exchange rates, and, hence, fiscal discipline.

Decentralisation: Decentralisation of authority and power to lower levels is a major force driving the need for change in the way government operates. The greater mobility of persons and goods, and ease of communication and information flows, has brought a number of public activities within effective reach of people. This has forced governments to decentralise the decision-making authority to the citizen contact point level.

Over the last two decades an increasing number of countries have made efforts to decentralise government services, often with emphasis on citizen's needs and requirements. Decentralisation has emerged as a result of a global trend to local autonomy and self determination, and as a result of a trend to reduce reliance on centralised planning of economies and be more responsive to citizens as well as local needs and characteristics. Governments today are pressurised by citizens to improve the delivery of public services in terms of responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency through decentralisation.

Thus, factors behind decentralisation appear to be related to:

- Trends worldwide towards a realisation that development should not be a top down process but rather that it requires community involvement and motivation. This has spilled over into demands by local governments and local populations for a greater share of resources and decision making power to affect their own development.
- The realisation that centralisation of the planning and allocation of resources has led to only limited flows of resources to the peripheral levels with much of the funds being drained off centrally. In some cases, at least on paper, governments are decentralising with the aim of improving public-sector/local government administration and performance and in an attempt to be less bureaucratic.
- A realisation that centrally administered programmes do not always provide for effective programme delivery at the local level, as they do not take into account local needs and characteristics.

Forces for change also include:

- Limited resources;
- Good Governance;
- Accountability;
- Technological Innovations;
- Downsizing;
- Restructuring;
- Changing relationships between public servants and citizens; and
- Changing societal norms.

If we do not change our direction, we are likely to end up where we are headed.

- Chinese Proverb

“Change”, in its broadest sense, is a planned or unplanned response to pressures and forces. Technological, economic, social and political forces have caused governments to modify their workings for decades. It would be unrealistic to suggest that there is universal agreement on the magnitude, the timeframe, and the implications of these forces. One part of a department might perceive reasons for change, while another may not; different parts of an organisation might find different reasons driving change as well.

What is Change?

For centuries, philosophers have struggled with different notions and views of change. The focus of contemporary management scholars on constant change owes a large debt to Heraclitus, who lived around 500 B.C. He said, “everything is born in strife and is in constant flux and whatever lives, lives by destroying something else (Wagner, 1995). Though the practice of management is as old as humanity, its formal establishment as an academic subject is a fairly recent one (Carr, 1996). Even more

recent – dating back to the 1940s is the emergence of ‘Change Management’ as a subject of inquiry.

According to the Chambers Dictionary, change means to alter, or make different, to make or to pass from one state to another, to exchange. In their writings, Chattopadhyay and Pareek (1982) describe organisational change as a relatively enduring alteration of the present state of an organisation or its components and their differentiated and integrated functions in totality and partially, in order to obtain greater viability in the context of the present and anticipated future environment. To Khandwalla (1982), organisational change means significant alteration in any one or more of the tasks, techniques, structure and people of the organisation.

Unplanned and Planned Change

There are two basic forms of change. One type is the **unplanned change**. Situations or conditions that is imposed on the organisation, and often unforeseen. Responsiveness to unplanned change requires tremendous flexibility and adaptability on the part of departments. A second category of change is the **planned change**. It can be defined as a conscious, deliberate and usually collaborative effort to improve the operations of a system. It involves some kind of organised effort and a deliberate decision to alter the department. Planned change, therefore involves inventing a future, and creating conditions and resources for realising that future.

Organisations are open systems that are dependent on their environment. As the environment does not stand still, organisations must develop mechanisms to facilitate planned change (Robbins, 1983). The concepts of “planned change” and “managed change”, commonly used in management literature, refer to changes that are deliberately shaped by members of the organisation. Throughout the large and expanding body of literature on change in business organisations, there is a consensus that planned organisational change is the most effective means by which change can be effected. The objective of planned change is to keep the organisations current and viable.

Types of Change

Linda Ackerman provides a useful way of categorising changes:

The first type of change that Ackerman suggests is *developmental* change: “The improvement of a skill, method or condition that for some reason does not measure up to current expectation... [thus] to do better than’ or ‘do more of what already exists” . This might be considered fine tuning – helping a department stretch, and thereby change.

Transitional change is introduced to have a department evolve slowly; current ways of doing things are replaced by something new, for example, introducing new services, processes, systems, technologies, etc. This kind of change involves many transition steps during which the department is neither what it once was nor what it aims to become. Such steps include temporary arrangements, pilots, and phased-in operations.

The most radical change Ackerman suggest is *transformational*.

It is catalyzed by a change in belief and awareness about what is possible and necessary for the department It is something akin to letting go of one trapeze in mid-air before a new one swings into view Unlike transitional change, the new is usually unknown until it begins to take shape.... Most of the variables are not to be controlled, rushed or short-circuited.

Transformational change does require a leap of faith for the department, although it is often initiated when other options appear to have failed. It is typified by a radical re-conceptualisation of the department's vision, mission, culture, critical success factors, form, leadership, and the like.

Determining what kind of change a department requires is clearly vital, for the depth and complexity of implementation grow significantly from developmental (much skill-building training), to transitional (setting up temporary positions, structures), to transformations (developing new beliefs, systems, gaining department wide commitment). A way of assessing the kind of change a department needs is to ponder the following questions prepared by Todd Jick.

Given that the department is under pressure to change its current way of doing things,

1. How far do we want to go? Is that too far – not far enough?
2. Are we contemplating the “path of least resistance,” or a direction that is truly needed?
3. What kind of results do we want – short term, longer term?
4. Do we want permanent change – or will that risk inflexibility, making future change more difficult?
5. How much change can the department absorb? At once? Cumulatively?
6. Can the changes contemplated be presented positively? If not, why not?
7. What happens if we don't change at all?

When to Change?

Given the pressures and types of changes possible to institute, *when* is the decision made to pull the lever. Basically, a department can institute change when

- Things are going well;
- Results are mixed;
- A full fledged crisis is upon it.

A department can anticipate pressures “down the road.” Considering making changes proactively can be partly a matter of foresight and preparation, but it can also entail the belief that if the department is not routinely changing itself, it risks complacency and stagnation.

Or, a department can encounter a problem, not necessarily life-threatening but one deserving attention, and thus feel the need to introduce change. Alternatively, a department faced with a definite threat – alarmingly deteriorating public perception – will most probably institute change, acutely recognising the need to do so.

Given these general “times” for introducing change, one might assume that the process is easier when the department is in crisis; the situation is clear to all, survival is on the line; everyone recognises that the way things have been done will not work anymore. But the very fact of the crisis suggests that there has been at best inattentiveness to its origins; there may be deep departmental problems that deter introducing changes to confront the situation. Thus, one might say, changes really should be made in anticipation of difficulties. But, paradoxically, making changes before “the crisis” is equally difficult – how can a department be energised to make changes when the need for them is not universally perceived? Some argue that a way around this paradox is to manufacture a sense of crisis rather than wait for the “real” one to appear. This crafting of urgency presumably elicits a responsiveness to change while placing the department at risk. The danger of this approach is in “crying wolf”.

When to change thus involves an exquisite sense of timing: have we waited too long or have we started too soon? The challenge is to choose the time when the department both should make changes and can do so.

Enabling Change: Choice Points in Change Management

Beyond the issues of what kind of change is needed and when it should be introduced, a department considers how to enable the change to be effective. This is not strictly an implementation matter; rather it involves yet another group of strategic choices to be contemplated before actual implementation occurs.

The first enabling issue is *pace*. How long will it take to design the change plan/programme? How quickly should the change unfold? How much accommodation should be made for trial and error learning? Is it “easier” for the department to introduce change quickly or over a period of time? But how much time does the department have, given citizens’ needs, competitive demands, i.e., the forces that are driving the change in the first place?

Related to pace is *scope*. Obviously this issue stems in large from the vision of what change is needed, but there are still choices to be made. Should the change start small and grow; or should it start big? If it is to be piloted – where and with whom? Should the pilot run in an area “loaded for success?” Where is the best climate for experimentation? Where is it more generalisable to the rest of the department?

If the decision is to start big, the issues of *depth* arise. How many changes can be introduced at any one time in any one area? The high risk/high reward approach is to blitz a department with a large number of consistent changes simultaneously to ensure maximum impact. But there is probably, a limit to how much change can be absorbed before resistance is mobilised – actively or passively, positively or negatively.

And related to scope is *publicity*: how loud, and to whom should the department announce change is on the way? The rationale is that to enable a department to change, there must be many clear reinforcements and motivational cues; everybody has to be excited and “committed” at the outset. On the other hand, this approach raises expectations (which may be too high already), makes the change highly visible and thus a target for snipers, naysayers. Little room for flexible adjustments of the change plan may be left. Thus, there is an argument for a quiet, understated introduction, which “controls” resistance, allows for mistakes in learning, and

moderates expectations. In either approach the issue is publicity; not communication, which is essential, although the degree of explicit information and to whom it is given may vary.

Another enabling change issues *supporting structures*. What mechanisms does a department have, or will put in place, to further the change effort? How much should be done through “normal” management processes and how much should be specially created?

Going through routine channels enables the change to be considered part of the normal expected departmental activities. The risk, of course, is that it might not be perceived as sufficiently important to get adequate attention and dedication. All too many change “projects” die early because they become too routinised. However, bringing in too many consultants and having too many task forces risks making the change effort the only departmental preoccupation.

The final enabling issue is deciding *who drives the change*. The classic approach has a senior departmental person “develop a vision”, which in turn is endorsed by its minister, and then assigned to middle management to implement. Clearly this approach depends on gaining department leadership commitment, but it underpays the need for middle or bottom level ownership. A second classic approach is the reverse; the need for change is envisioned from deep down in the organisation, brought up for approval or endorsement to highest level appropriate and then again placed in the hands of the middle of the department to implement. Research evidence again and again proved that middle management is critical to the success of any change effort. A third approach is using an outside consultant as an implementer/facilitator. This approach has its own inherent advantages and disadvantages. Advantage is that outside consultant brings in fresh perspectives to the problem on hand and also brings his expertise in the field. But, acceptability is a major disadvantage. Employees in the department may not accept him as he does not understand the ground realities of the department.

Resistance to Change

Perhaps the greatest challenge of all comes with the awareness that managing change includes managing the reaction to that change. Especially, managing the reactions to change in a government setting is extremely difficult given the complex nature of government and its deep rooted values and procedures. Unfortunately, change is frequently introduced without considering its psychological effect on others in the department – particularly those who have not been part of the decision to make the change. However, it is fair to state that if the reactions to change are not anticipated – and managed – the change process will be needlessly painful and perhaps even stressful.

Traditionally, grouped under resistance to change are inertia, habit, and comfort with the known. For most people, change isn’t actively sought; some level of routine is preferred. But routine is preferred because it enables some control. Given that change, at its onset at least, involves some ambiguity if not outright confusion, this control is threatened. That is, resistance is frequently a reaction to a loss of control, not necessarily to the change itself. The further away a person is from knowing the rationale for the change, the implications of the change, how the change is to be

