

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.

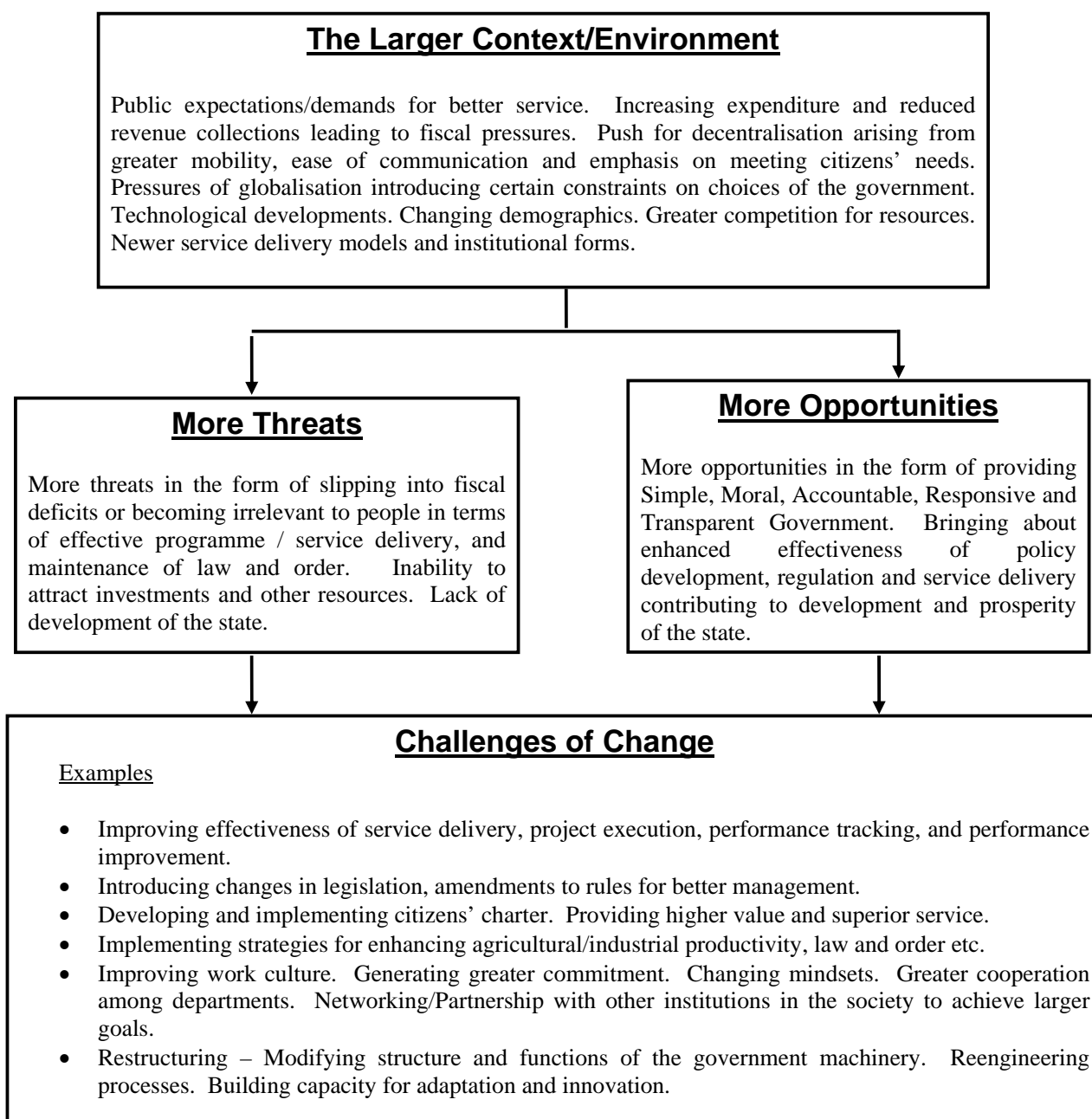


Figure 1: Forces driving the need for change in Government

