

Changing Mindsets in Government Organisations

—Dr S. Ramnarayan

A stakeholder was having an interesting conversation with a middle level officer in a department of the government. The officer had talked about a decision process that was under way, which pertained to his area of work. After mentioning about the cumbersome journey of the decision through the corridors of bureaucracy, he joked about the endless meetings with indifferent participants and the unwieldy procedures with little concern for timeliness. He concluded that the final decision was certainly expected to end up wasting a lot of resources, but not achieve the intended purpose. After listening to the graphic account, the stakeholder asked the officer as to why he could not influence the process and ensure that the right decision was made. The question seemed to surprise the officer at the operating level. He pointed out that the decision was made by the government, and not by him. But the stakeholder persisted, “But you are the government in this case. After all, the matter pertains to your area of work”. The officer felt a bit irritated by the comment. He perceived the stakeholder as having too simplistic a view of the situation. He said, “You don’t understand. I just move files. The governmental system makes the decision. And it specialises in wasting resources and frustrating people. *And I cannot help it*”.

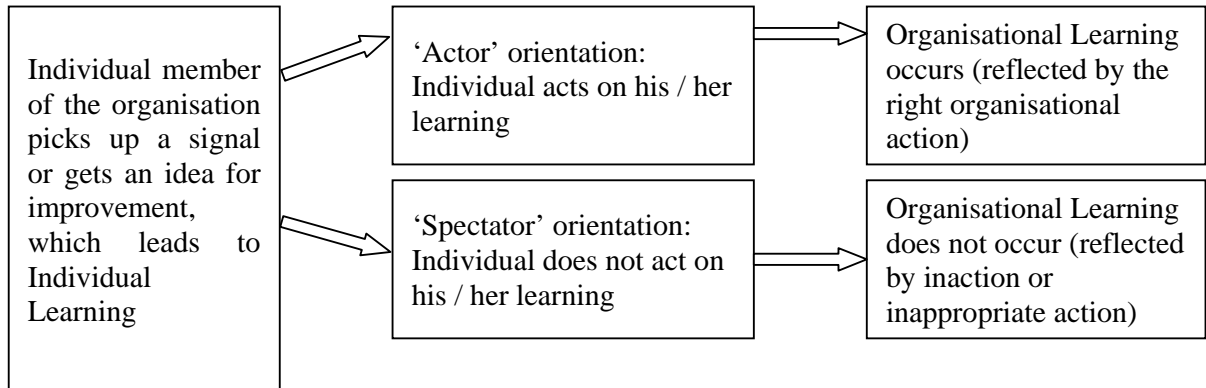
‘Spectator’ and ‘Actor’ Mindsets

In the above illustration, the middle level officer had clearly assumed the stance of a ‘spectator’ rather than that of an ‘actor’ in the system. With a spectator orientation, he could see what was happening; he could comment on it; but there was no way he felt capable of exercising positive influence to move the decision in the right direction. The implicit assumption was that he was quite powerless in the situation.

How does such a mindset influence the functioning of a government agency? Let us say that an officer at the operating level in a government department has received instructions relating to the introduction of a scheme. With several years of experience behind him, he is aware of ground realities. He may quickly realise that the scheme has some lacunae, which would defeat its intended purpose. But the ‘spectator’ mindset leads to certain implicit choices. The middle level officer does not share this feedback with higher levels. Instead, he passes on the papers down the line in a routine way for action. As a result, his knowledge and insight do not diffuse to the larger system, and the scheme is taken up for action, and predictably gets mired in difficulties.

In other words, even when the members of the system are aware that the decision or approach is destined to fail, the organisation itself continues to function as if it does not know of the potential minefields that are bound to cripple the decision. Thus when the employees assume the stance of ‘spectator’ rather than ‘actor’ in the system, there is little hope for the concerned agency to learn through anticipatory and proactive actions. Instead, the agency runs into hurdles that could have been easily anticipated and avoided, and in the process the customers, citizens or other stakeholders are made to suffer setbacks and crises needlessly.

Figure 1: How Actor or Spectator mindset affects translation of Individual Learning to Organisational Learning



From the brief illustration, we would also be able to notice an important facet of organisational learning. As can be seen from Figure 1, an organisation can learn and adapt its actions only if the organisational member, who picks up the signal, acts on the signal. We can say that in this case, the concerned employee is the individual learning agent through whom the organisation learns. The individual learning agents need not necessarily be organisational members at the operating level; they could even be customers/citizens receiving the service, or any other person or group that has a potentially valuable input for the decision making.

But our brief illustration demonstrates that such individual learning or insight does not automatically lead to organisational learning. When organisational members behave like spectators, their information, ideas, and insights do not flow to the decision making levels. When channels connecting the different parts of the organisation are choked, valuable views and perspectives are lost to the decision makers. As a result, decisions are made with partial perspectives and insufficient understanding, and government departments appear to function in an unthinking manner. Unfortunately that only serves to reinforce the spectator mindset.

In this paper, we focus on the behavioural dynamics of government officers at the operating levels. We examine a number of questions. Why do the officers at the operating levels tend to follow the path of least resistance? What factors reinforce the 'play safe' attitude? What factors prevent officers at middle levels from functioning as responsible members and sorting out issues in the agency's best interests? When decision-making processes are characterised by impersonal file and paper movements, poor judgments, inordinate delays, and apparent paradoxes, how do they affect the employee perceptions about the organisation? Our purpose is to understand the factors that lead employees at the cutting edge of the government departments to either feel energised to perform and excel, or feel deflated, powerless, and incapable of taking charge.

Officers at Operating Levels

In developing countries like India, government departments typically tend to be large hierarchies with multiple layers of management. As mentioned earlier, we would focus on operating level officers in this paper. For our purpose, we define this category of employees as including all those with supervisory/ managerial responsibility, but function below the level of the head of department with an overall responsibility for a function or department.

Operating level officers are expected to play a crucial role in ensuring that departmental activities are well-coordinated, that employees act responsively and responsibly, and that the agency continuously generates appropriate alternatives to grapple with its problems. Further, it is at this operating level that the government's policies and strategies get translated into decisions and actions. However, it is evident that the nature of behavioural dynamics at this level has remained largely unexplored and appropriate strategies for effective utilisation of this critical resource have not been examined. While the literature has focused a great deal on leadership roles and styles, there is a theoretical void about the nature of roles of officers at operating levels, and aspects of their functioning. Even in the world of practice, the preoccupation is largely with senior level as it is seen as being concerned with the important work of planning a strategy. The middle levels tend to be ignored as not very consequential because operating managers have to merely execute what has been visualised at the top. Unfortunately, when there is little attention to the nuts and bolts issues of execution, grand plans fail to bridge the chasm between the worlds of paper and practice.

Writings on managerial work suggest that at the operating levels work is more focused, more short-term in outlook, and the characteristics of brevity and fragmentation are more pronounced. According to some management scholars, three aspects characterise managerial work: demands, constraints, and choices. It is reasonable to assume that, at the operating level, managerial roles will be relatively low on choice and high on demands and constraints compared to higher levels.

Figure 2: Two broad functions of officers at middle levels

