Pushing for Positive Change in Government

by

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Given the existing reality of the functioning of governmental organizations, how do we get reform actions *actually* implemented? How do we take the first steps in terms of creating a culture of change in government departments? This paper explores these important challenges of change, and outlines a roadmap for moving beyond *intentions* to actually *initiate* needed changes, successfully navigate through the *implementation* process, and even attempt to *institutionalize* change.

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Moving from Intentions to Implementation: The Challenge of Change

In most government organizations, there are no shortages of analytical reports or action plans. External agencies and internal groups have often studied key aspects of the organizational functioning and come up with recommendations for improvements. Training programmes and workshops have been conducted to discuss important ideas. If 'talk' was an indicator of change, then the progress would be considered remarkable. But a common lament is that very little of such *prescriptions* and *pronouncements* get translated into *practice*.

An examination of the different causes of this large gap between *knowing what to do* and *actually doing it* would bring us to the issue of mindset and culture. What characterizes the mindset in government organizations today? In Table 1, we present an account of what the employees themselves feel about their working.

How Mindset Creates Impediments to Change

It is not difficult to see how such a culture can create severe impediments to successful change implementation. We need to clearly recognize these major impediments so that we can ensure that the design of the new approach is appropriate in such a scenario.

A major change happens over a period of time. As it is a process, *not an* event, *feelings of ownership and involvement are critical for success. In other words, a limited commitment system can manage an 'event' (like an emergency situation or a crisis), not a 'process' that unfolds over a period of time and therefore, requires persistent and consistent set of actions over time. When we do not invest sufficient efforts in building ownership, involvement and commitment of people at operating levels, there is little hope that we would be able to elicit and major commitments of time, energy and effort from them to make implementation successful.*

Major changes require substantial amount of resources to be committed over a period of time. These are not just in terms of finances. A major requirement would be in terms of leadership attention consistently over a period of time to make changes happen. When the leadership is busy with routines and fire-fighting, their attention and support would be either spread too thinly over several efforts, or would be missing altogether. Every change requires a certain minimum level of time, energy and attention to succeed. If the interventions are not of the right dosage, the efforts may create a 'flash in the pan', but no lasting change.

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Table 1
Functioning of Government Organizations:
Employees' Own Perceptions

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What we are

- Even at senior levels, there is a high degree of ***pre-occupation with day-to-day routines and fire-fighting***; this drives out strategic thinking
- Mindset is characterized by ***short-term and status-quo orientation***. As a result, most people don't see a connection with their larger purpose, or contribution
- There is a great deal of ***helplessness about constraints***. Traditional hierarchy creates huge vertical barriers to communication and leads to lack of influence with seniors. High degree of compartmentalization and poor linkage mechanisms and processes lead to absence of influence with peers/other sections or departments.
- Superiors exhibit ***'Pressure' and 'Push' style of influence, not 'Pull' style***. In other words, there is excessive reliance on directive style to get work done. Little or no effort is made to get buy-in for the orders or instructions issued or energize and empower people to be pro-active.
- When confronted with specific instructions/orders and pressures, there is ***conformity, not commitment***. People do the minimum that is required to avoid sanctions.
- Under the circumstances, the system operates at a low level of equilibrium, and ***performs only in crisis or emergency situations*** by temporarily suspending the usual patterns of working and mobilizing resources for a relatively short time on a single agenda.

What we are not

- Even when there are crises just waiting to happen, there is little ***anticipatory and participatory learning***.
- There is little or no ***appreciation***. The communication is characterized by a great deal of criticism and cynicism.
- There is little ***mutual trust, respect, and friendship in teams***. Relationships are largely impersonal.
- The organization has little ***focus on clear priorities***. With clear directions missing, there is only focus on activities.
- There is little ***open, free and frank communication***. The recipients of communication are usually ignored in the process. There are no honest conversations on key issues.
- There is lack of ***effectiveness in managing mistakes***. As employees are afraid of witch-hunting, there is little impetus to take initiative and act.
- There is little ***sensitivity to internal and external customer satisfaction***. There is no concern for individuals/ groups being served.
- ***Strong lateral and vertical communication and linkages*** are missing.

Need for Social Mobilization

As stated above, when the level of employee skills, motivation and self-esteem is not high, strength of argument is not sufficient to elicit action. In such a scenario, people may agree with the issues but no one comes forward to initiate actions required.

As a result, when the leaders start the change campaign by defining the problem and planned strategy, and back the proposed strategy with huge amount of data, the operating level officials at the receiving end tend to get entrenched in the roles of spectators or skeptics. As a result, implementation suffers. At the same time, it also won't be realistic to assume that people would volunteer themselves in defining change initiative or propose new strategies in an entrepreneurial fashion.

The technique of 'small wins' would be helpful in such situations. This involves asking people to make small initial commitments. Small commitments lead to small successes. The small wins demonstrate to employees at operating levels that they can reform certain things in the department or organization. When visible results flow from a number of small wins, a new sentiment is introduced into the system, and this can precipitate changes in mindsets over time if the incremental reform implementation approach is persisted with. So the overall problem is structured before these are presented to the *appropriate groups of change agents*. The change agents are involved in analyzing the problem and discovering the solutions that they can put in place at local level. There is follow-up to prevent the possibility that the reform implementation workshops conducted for change agents do not merely become a 'flash in the pan'. Thus the system is gently nudged to some small wins to generate a new sentiment.

Social mobilization involves opening up channels of communication with employees through different forms of interactions. The interactions should be qualitatively different. There should be free exchange of views, honest conversations and brainstorming and effective listening. People should be encouraged to make small initial commitments that lead to small wins. When visible results flow from a number of small wins, a positive sentiment is generated for larger change.

Social mobilization approach succeeds when there is sufficient investment of time, energy and effort in building motivation and commitment of critical mass of change agents. Leadership has certain critical roles. First and foremost, it must instill and sustain hope. It should clearly define the outputs and outcomes desired. It should frame issues and organize events to aid problem solving. It must provide continuous monitoring and support to the whole the process. We elaborate this approach in some detail below, and then outline a roadmap for change management in the following sections.

Basic Elements of the Proposed Change Approach

As the foregoing discussion suggests, there are certain key elements of the proposed approach to change. These have been outlined below.

Energetic leadership to establish credibility of the approach: With a certain amount of effort, it would be possible to get most of the key employees (who would function as change agents) to

make initial investment of effort to come up with ideas and suggestions for change. But these efforts had to translate into small wins so that their hopes could be sustained. The involvement of leaders and their willingness to decide quickly on acceptable ideas is an important factor in this regard. When leaders do not display much enthusiasm or interest, the change agent groups quickly lose their impetus for change. Thus leaders play a key role in providing change agents cognitive justification for continuing to make efforts. They keep alive the hope that changes can be made in this manner. Their action or inaction determines the credibility of the whole effort.

Under the circumstances, it would be necessary to link/integrate the efforts of change agents with priorities of the leaders of the department. The follow-up initiative should help in focusing leadership time, attention and energy on the change interventions. In the initial stages, the leaders of the department may define the problem or focus areas based on the following criteria:

- Concern should be important, urgent and compelling
- It should have high potential pay-off in terms of service quality to citizens/other stakeholders; and
- In the initial stages, group should only take up short-term pay-off projects so that there are visible improvements in 3 to 6 months. It was felt that visible results would generate positive feelings not only among citizens/stakeholders, but also among individuals and groups involved in the change effort. The reinforcement from success would be important to sustain the momentum of change process.

Clearly defining the outputs and outcomes desired: Achievement is a product of competence and commitment. When departmental leaders make active contribution to defining the priorities clearly in terms of outputs and outcomes desired, motivation of change agents is stimulated. This requires clearly articulating certain projects with medium visibility, having worthwhile pay-off, and not demanding unduly high levels of effort. When there is a clear and specific demand, there is a spur for creating requisite capacity to meet that demand. By remaining in touch with the change and developmental agenda of the department, effective follow-up can create a 'pull' factor for reforms.

Framing of issues or organizing of events to aid problem-solving: Simple tools and techniques to frame issues, structure the analysis and action planning process are found to be helpful in quickly achieving shared understanding of the problems and possible solutions. Similarly, when specific events like workshops, follow-up meetings or review sessions are scheduled to aid problem solving, they serve to provide a context for galvanizing people to action. The support for organizing events and providing tools for analysis has to be provided from outside the department.

Thus we need to have a system for effectively following up the change agent workshops. This would involve creating more change agents, organizing events to facilitate the process of framing of issues to aid problem solving, having an effective method of supporting the implementation process.

Rapidly increasing the number of change agents in the system: It is important to rapidly increase the number of change agents in the system. This is because effective change implementation requires a critical mass of change implementers. The change agent approach is a

viable idea to quickly create a critical mass of change implementers. We have to quickly gear up to meet this need. In addition, we need to actively follow up the workshops with field level interactions, consultations and evaluation. Unless there is a strong and effective follow-up, much of the potential for change generated by change agent workshops may not be realized in actual practice.

Research emphasizes that a key factor contributing to success of change process is the presence of sufficient number of activists in the group who believed in making changes. When there are individuals who share common interest, it becomes easy to work together to make quick progress. When there are too few motivated and committed individuals, groups find it difficult to break free of the inertia plaguing the system. Thus it is clear that for the change effort to sustain itself, we need a certain minimum number of individuals who are ready to move away from spectator orientation, and invest time, energy and effort to initiate changes in the department. These are individuals who do not remain preoccupied with their personal cost-benefit equation, but act because they believe in the cause.

If more numbers can be quickly added to the change agent group through more workshops, network of attachments and acquaintances, the approach gains strength. This also leads to a more visible and a more positive shift in the mood within the larger department. Thus our proposed reform or change strategy has several key elements. We summarize these factors in Table 2. Incorporating these elements, we have outlined a roadmap for change management in the following part of the paper.

Major Steps in Reform Implementation

Establishment of an Apex Transition Management Team (TMT)

It would be necessary to create an apex team to oversee all reform implementation initiatives in the government. This is crucial given the large number of change initiatives that would have been launched by any state government. Overseas experience in administrative reforms and large-scale reorganisations indicate that change programmes can fail to deliver results if they are poorly co-ordinated. Unrelated change programmes lead to a loss of focus and clarity that are essential for success. In addition, people in the organisation begin to experience change "fatigue" leading to cynicism, diminished commitment and resistance to change. The apex team will integrate and co-ordinate the reform implementation efforts to ensure that they all contribute to the common goals of enhancing efficiency and responsiveness. The team will ensure that the timing and sequence of change efforts are such that they do not overwhelm the capacity of the people experiencing the changes. Apex Transition Management Team should be composed of at least five members drawn from senior officers of the government and representative/s from the academic institutions. This five-member team will have a time frame of three years. It will also have full-time secretarial support.

Building Blocks of the Proposed Approach to
Change Management in Government

1. Involve people in analyzing problems and action taking
   - Problem solving is not merely an intellectual process. It is also a social process.
   - Effectiveness of decisions is determined by: (a) Quality of solution; (b) Acceptance/Ownership; (c) Timeliness
   - Execution fails when we don't mobilize people
   - Involvement works best when you listen with head and heart and respond positively to worthwhile suggestions

2. Determine clear priorities for problem solving
   - By chasing too many problems, we achieve very little
   - 'Focus' is critical for success

3. Initially focus on 'Controllable' problems
   - Look at the right level of details – Don't pitch it too high or too low
   - Issues to be framed carefully. For example, rather than complain about a larger problem (such as absence of skills and commitment in government organizations), one needs to look at what is required in one's own team.

4. Choose those interventions that give the optimal leverage
   - When you intervene at the level of systems and processes, you get better pay-off from your effort
   - Trying to change people without making any other changes in the systems or organization is an uphill struggle

5. 'Small Wins' approach
   - Ask for small commitments
   - Small commitments lead to small wins
   - Small wins create impetus for further action

6. Sharpen the cutting edge
   - Performance will suffer if the cutting edge is blunt
   - Many change efforts fail because we under-communicate by a factor of ten
   - A big part of communication is listening and facilitation
   - Provide simple and effective tools for problem solving to people who have to act

7. Linkage, mobilization and monitoring are too important to be left to chance
   - Organizational boundaries slow down and distort 'flow' processes
   - Interface processes need special attention. Otherwise we would have the paradox of 'dull units with bright members'

Establishment of an Implementation Support Team (IST)

It is also necessary to create an Implementation Support Team that will facilitate the reform implementation by providing the necessary training inputs and carrying out effective follow-up. This team will also create necessary learning resources, review and monitor the reform projects and create a database of change experiences. Programme managers are needed to work closely with departmental heads in organising and conducting the workshops. In addition, Implementation Support Managers are needed to facilitate database creation and supervise field visits. Field executives will review and monitor implementation progress through regular field visits. In addition, a team leader to co-ordinate the work of the whole team is required for better coordination.

Identify and Select Target Departments for Reforms

In the initial phase, each state government would focus its efforts on certain key departments. This would be done so as to be able to make changes/reforms actually happen in such a manner that the quality, timeliness, cost and overall effectiveness of service to customers/citizens show significant improvements. As our focus is on catalyzing the actual reform implementation, we cannot merely restrict ourselves to conducting programmes and workshops. We need a strong implementation support/facilitation cell that would be charged with the following responsibilities:

1. Close interaction with the leadership of the department: As we have stated earlier, the departmental leaders have to define the priorities clearly in terms of outputs and outcomes desired. By clearly articulating worthwhile goals, the leaders spur problem solving in their teams. In addition, leaders should be willing to decide quickly on acceptable ideas that change agents come up with. They have to display enthusiasm and interest so that the impetus for change is sustained. The implementation support/facilitation cell will maintain close liaison with the leadership of the department to channelize leadership time, attention and energy to the reform implementation interventions to inject life into those interventions, and thus help make change happen.

2. Follow-up/monitoring of implementation of action plans formulated during workshops: Members of the implementation support cell will make field visits to district and other offices regularly to find out the extent of progress made on action plans prepared during workshops. By regularly keeping in touch with change agents, they would provide them assistance in terms of consultation for problem solving.

3. Developing database of best practices and facilitation of diffusion of innovation: Regular field visits would help implementation support team members to understand implementation successes and failures. They can develop a database of best practices or implementation hurdles. They can contribute to diffusion of innovation across different departments/locations etc.

The members of the implementation support cell should be energetic individuals with expertise in carrying out action research and facilitation. They would be primarily responsible for

performing linkage and integration role that is critical for effective implementation.

It is quite obvious that faculty members/resource persons responsible for conducting reform implementation programmes, programme coordinators and members of implementation support cell should function as a cohesive team to catalyze reform implementation. Linkages have to be maintained with the departmental leaders. Working arrangements, reporting relationships and integrative processes should be carefully designed to facilitate organic team functioning that is committed to the effective implementation of change agenda.

Identify and Select Reform Projects in the Departments

This activity would be carried out by change agents with the active involvement and inputs from the leadership of the department. The change agents will:

- Review the reform priorities for the department.
- Go through the studies conducted by institutions and consultants pertaining to the department and look at the department-specific recommendations made by the studies, and accepted by the government.
- Translate the proposed action plans and priorities into discrete projects.
- Wherever possible, hold focus group discussions with a sample of customers/citizens and community groups for receiving ideas/suggestions and validating the projects identified.
- Categorize the chosen projects into two types of reforms:
  - *First Order Reforms*: Reforms that can be implemented within the department with minimal additional resources in reasonably short time. These would be implemented through change agents.
  - *Second Order Reforms*: Reforms that require changing structures, systems or frameworks and are not fully within the control of the department. Such projects would not fall within the ambit of change agents.
- Review and finalize the final list of projects to be implemented through change agents.

Communicate the Reform Objectives and the Process to be followed

Departmental Heads will do this with the help of IST. This will involve:

- Sending formal written communication about the change priorities of the department and selected change projects to the department employees.
- Face-to-face communication about the department priorities and selected projects at the head quarters, districts and other levels. In this meeting, interested employees would be invited to volunteer themselves for working on and contributing to the projects.

Set up Change Project Teams in the Departments

This activity would be coordinated by Change Agent Group. The IST will support them. This step will involve:

- Compiling a list of employees who would act as Change Agents for implementing selected change projects.
- Reviewing and finalizing the list of Change Agents.

- For different change projects, identifying appropriate groups of Change Agents and individuals who would act as Project Leaders for different projects.
- As newer projects get identified, expanding the list of Change Agents in an appropriate manner.
- Identifying the training requirements of project leaders and change agents.
- Conducting workshops as necessary for project leaders and change agents.

Train Change Project Teams to Develop Action Plans

IST will drive this step of the reform implementation process with the help of other consultants and experts available with the department. The programme managers will take care of the logistics and other arrangements to coordinate the program administration. The program faculty will facilitate problem-solving process during the workshop so that key issues are properly identified, appropriate solutions are developed and effective plans are made for implementation. Throughout this step, Departmental Heads will be involved in the process. The IST will:

- Organize workshops for equipping the change agent groups with appropriate problem solving tools and techniques for making effective progress on their selected projects.
- Ensure that the Change Agents Workshop end with a clear and complete action plan including:
    - What needs to be done?
    - Who will be responsible for completing the task?
    - How will they do it?
    - When will they do it – specific timelines?
    - What kinds of resources are required?
- At the end of the workshop, review action plans and make appropriate decisions for assigning accountabilities and providing resources and people.
- Convert the final actions chosen for implementation into appropriate orders.
- Develop appropriate learning materials/resources for the reform implementation teams. This would include best practices, case studies, and appropriate frameworks.

Implement Action Plans; Monitor & Review Implementation; Remove Roadblocks

This is the most crucial step in the reform implementation process. This will require the active involvement of TMT, IST and the Departmental Heads. The departmental Heads will closely monitor implementation. They will implement the action plans developed in the previous step. The IST will:

- Follow-up/monitor implementation of action plans formulated during workshop by making periodic field visits to find out the extent of progress made on action plans prepared during workshop. Also talk to citizens/customers and community groups, wherever possible to find out the impact of the reform implementation.
- Compile the observations and analyse the findings in terms of where the progress of implementation is satisfactory, what appear to be the roadblocks to reform implementation and how these can be removed.
- Send periodic reports to the leaders of the department on the progress of implementation at different districts/locations.

- Develop a database of common implementation hurdles and best practices in implementation.
- Go through the reports of the Implementation Support Cell and develop appropriate training materials that can help in effective diffusion of innovation and best practices across different departments and locations.
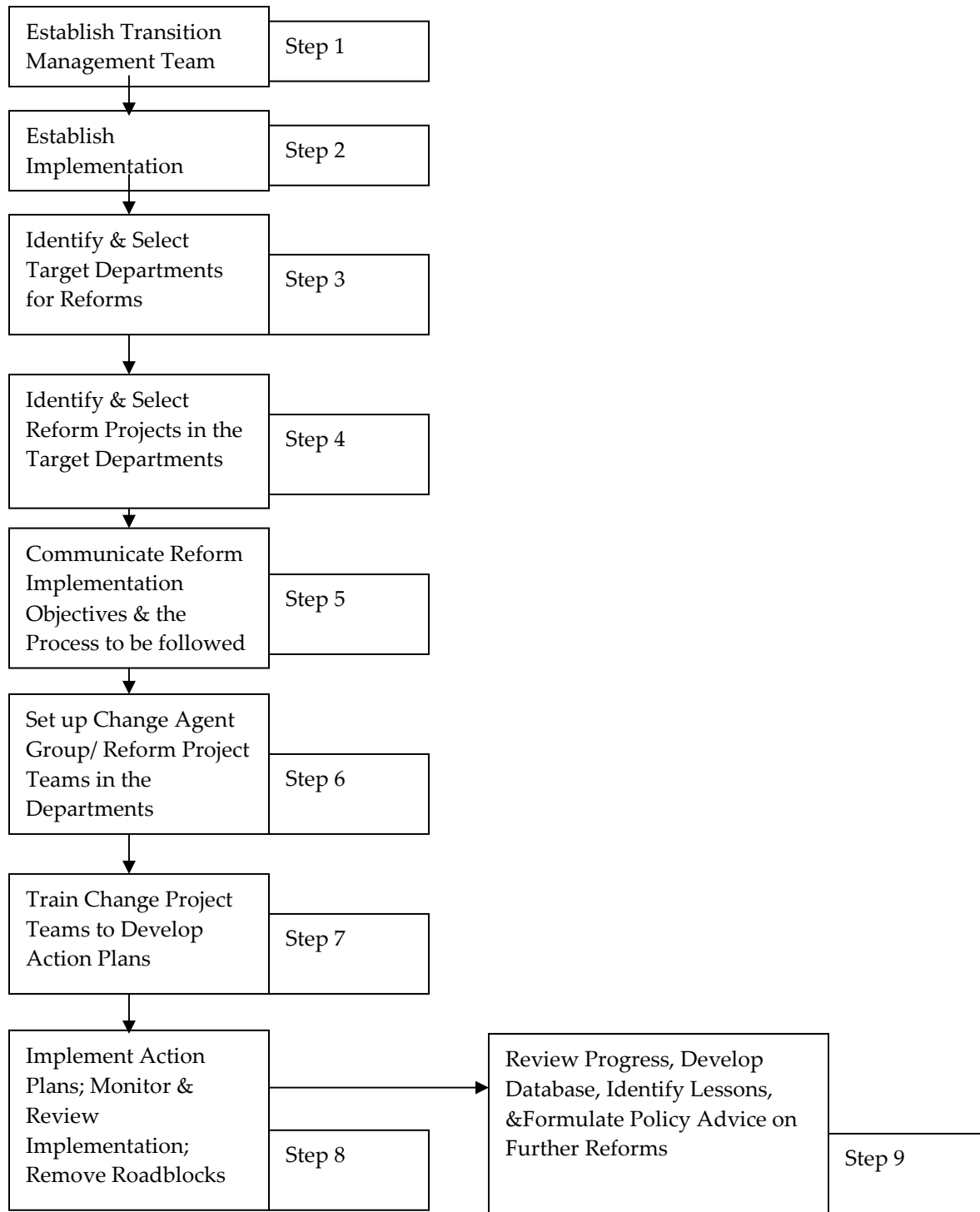
The Departmental Heads will:

- Based on the feedback received, decide on corrective actions to be initiated at different levels, nature of assistance to be provided to change agents for strengthening implementation.

Review Progress, Develop Database, Identify Lessons, & Formulate Policy Advice on Further Reforms

TMT, IST and Departmental Heads will work together in this step. They will:

- After a certain period has elapsed, conduct a review of the progress achieved on different projects at different districts/locations.
- Decide on what follow-up workshops are required, what new training programs have to be conducted.
- Document the lessons learned. The write-up should capture key insights derived from the experiences of reform implementation so that future actions are made efficient & effective. The following key questions may be asked to derive lessons from the implementation experience.
    i.   What was intended?
    ii. What was really done?
    iii. What results were achieved?
    iv. What was learned?
- Identify what are some of the systemic difficulties confronted by most departments and how these need to be overcome by appropriate government orders. Plan separate interventions to address these concerns.
- Prepare and submit policy advice to the government on future reform implementation programmes

Annexure 1: Steps in the Change Process

| Establish Transition Management Team | Step 1 |

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| Establish Implementation | Step 2 |

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| Identify & Select Target Departments for Reforms | Step 3 |

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| Identify & Select Reform Projects in the Target Departments | Step 4 |

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| Communicate Reform Implementation Objectives & the Process to be followed | Step 5 |

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| Set up Change Agent Group/ Reform Project Teams in the Departments | Step 6 |

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| Train Change Project Teams to Develop Action Plans | Step 7 |

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| Implement Action Plans; Monitor & Review Implementation; Remove Roadblocks | Step 8 | → | Review Progress, Develop Database, Identify Lessons, &Formulate Policy Advice on Further Reforms | Step 9 |

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