

## 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*”.

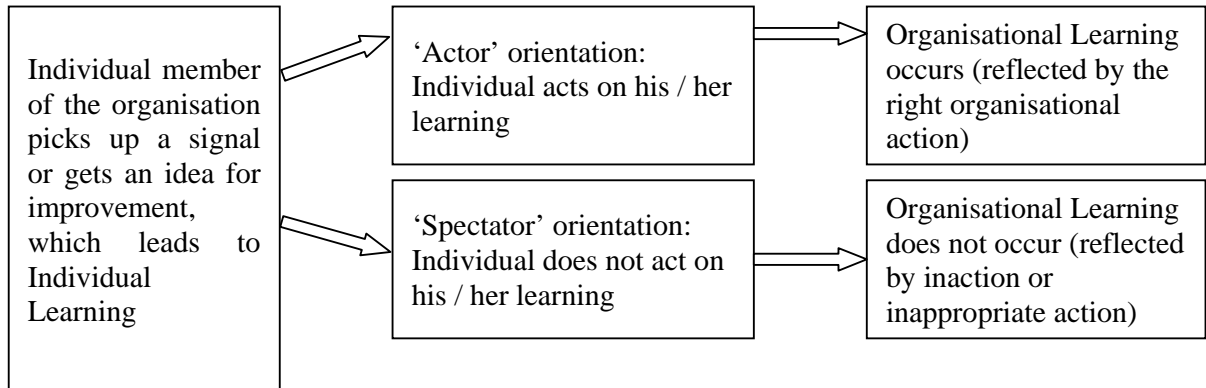
### ‘Spectator’ and ‘Actor’ Mindsets

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.

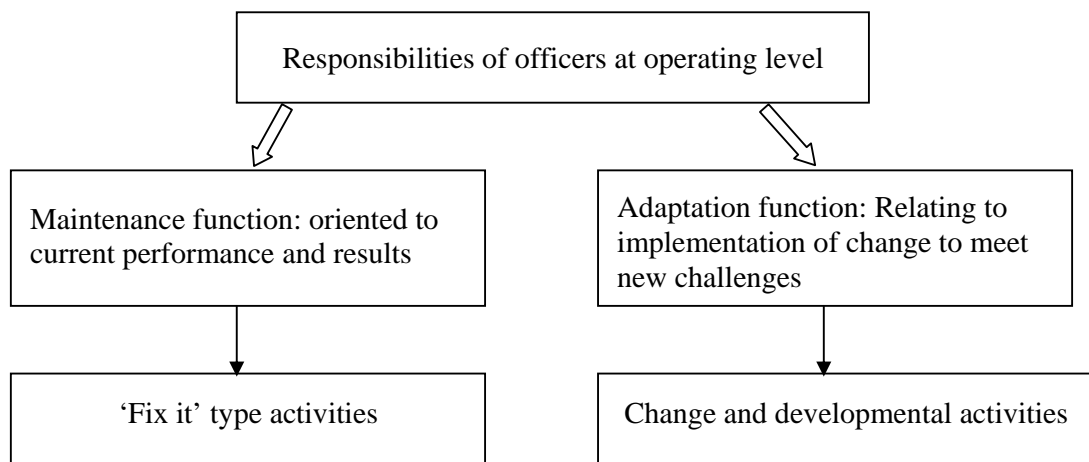
### Officers at Operating Levels

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.

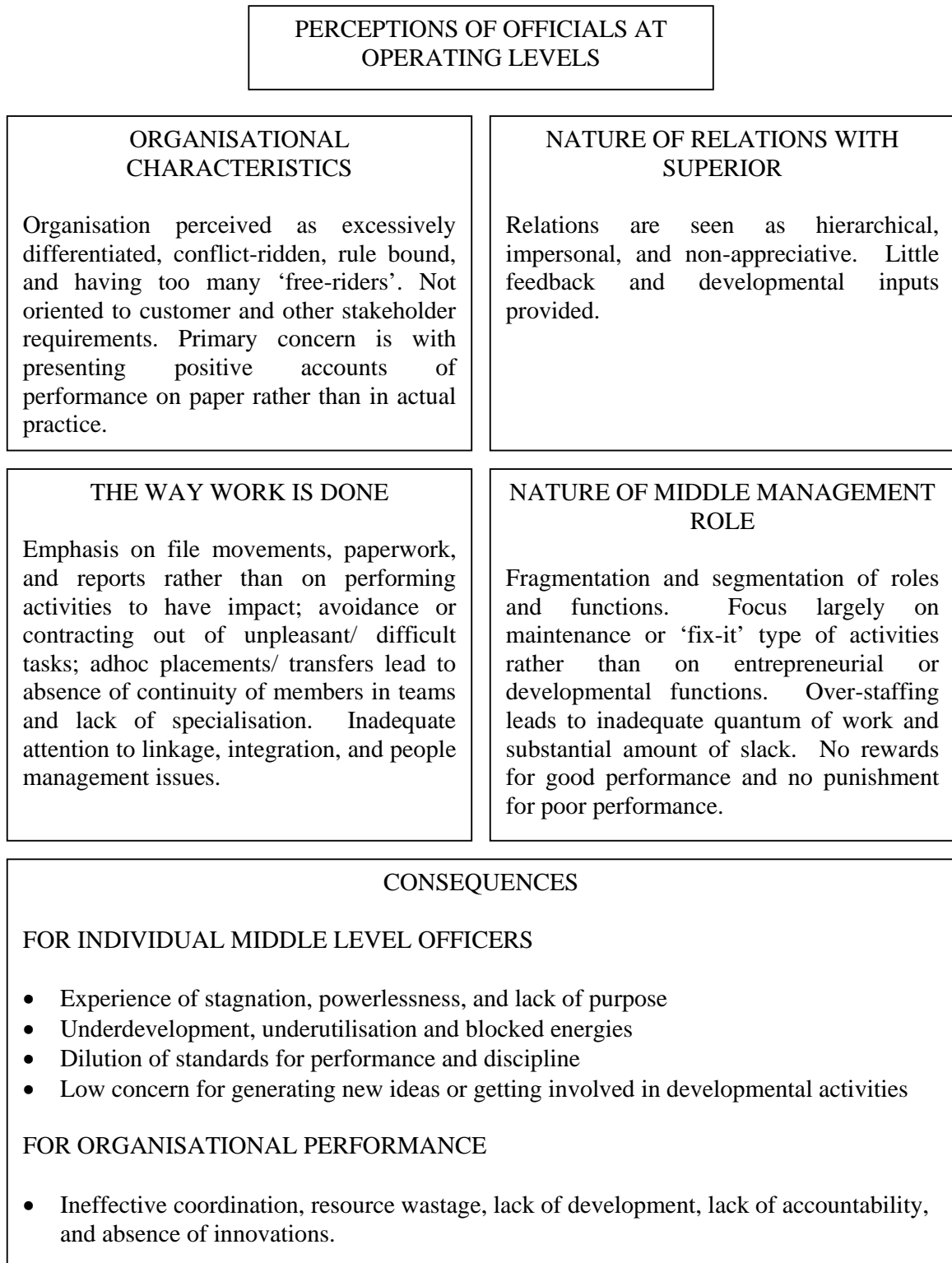
**Figure 2: Two broad functions of officers at middle levels**



As presented in Figure 2, we may consider a simple framework in which middle level officers are seen to accomplish two essential organisational functions—a maintenance function oriented to ensuring current performance and results and an adaptation function which includes activities intended to promote innovation, and growth, and aspects relating to the implementation of new ideas to deal with new challenges. Earlier studies have shown that operating management work consists largely of ‘fix-it’ type of activities—trying to deal with systems and processes that are not working and managing breakdowns in normal routine flow of work. Officers at the operating levels were found to be involved only to a very limited extent with the adaptation function.

This paper attempts to develop an in-depth understanding of how middle level officers in government bureaucracies perceive the world around them and how these perceptions affect their functioning. The paper is based on observations of day-to-day behaviour of operating level officers in their work context, and discussions with them as to why they do what they do. We know that most action is mediated by cognitive frames and mental models, and employees make sense of their environment through these cognitive frames. This paper explores the mindsets and implicit choices underlying the behaviour of middle level officers to gain insight into factors which mobilise or block their energies.

**Figure 3: Issues and Concerns of Officials at Middle Levels**



### **Perceptions at middle levels and Consequences: Framework**

We have organised our observations in the form of a simple framework presented in Figure 3. As our purpose is to explore cognitive frames and mindsets of middle level government officers, we present their view or their perceptions with regard to the nature of relations with superiors, characteristics of the organisation, the way work is done (or not done), and nature of their role at operating levels. The consequences of these perceptions for individual and organisational performance are also discussed. As would be quite evident from the framework, consequences of the middle level world view would further reinforce their perceptions of the reality, and so mindsets would tend to get stabilised over a period of time. That is the reason why a change in mindset is an up-hill struggle, and demands energetic, conscious and concerted efforts.

In the following sections, we discuss each aspect of the framework in some detail. The concluding section would discuss what the organisation needs to do to create an enabling work environment, where employees feel like ‘actors’ capable of making meaningful contributions rather than like helpless ‘spectators’.

### **Perceptions of the Larger Organisation**

Our observations indicate that in the world view of middle level officers, there are numerous anomalies, paradoxes, and contradictions in organisational decision-making. These have been briefly examined below.

*Multiple power groups pulling in different directions:* The organisational functioning is sought to be influenced by multiple interest groups both within and outside the organisational boundaries, each pursuing its own agenda even if that agenda is at variance from the overall organisational goals and interests. Each interest group possesses a certain amount of influence, and so can derail change or at least create some roadblocks for effective implementation. So the design tends to be excessively differentiated, and inadequately integrated. This presents a huge challenge in developing and implementing a common programme of action.

As a result of multiple power groups, there are constant pressures to make exceptions to rules, policies and procedures. A few decision-makers yield to the pressures and deviate from the policy itself or from established practice. So after a certain point of time, it becomes difficult to figure out what the frameworks are. As exceptions get made without clear communication of the justification, others may say ‘if that person can get it, why not me?’ As a result, individuals persist with their demands even if they seem unjustified or irrational.

*Resource scarcity:* Another common complaint pertains to scarcity of resources and meaningless procedures. For example, while the head of the department may be talking of e-governance, the officer at the operating level may be confronting the problem of having no budget allocation for settling the electricity bill and so facing disconnection of power supply. In a resource-scarce environment, members are also dependent on the department for a number of things including personal benefits such as loans and access to valuable opportunities. This dependence creates additional complexities in the relationship between the officer and the department.

*Poor concern for performance:* The general view at the middle levels is that the organisation has low concern for performance. The work is seen to have been completed when a circular or office order is released. In many cases, there is little or no follow-up to check if the desired impact has been achieved. There are also no consequences for performance or non-performance. There is a great deal of job security, and few rewards for excellent performance and hardly any disincentives for poor performance. In such an atmosphere, people work only because they want to work. The demands from the system are minimal.

*Free-riders:* As a result of the above factors, many free riders exist in the system. For example, it was found that several quotas exist for a posting in the capital city in a state government department – individuals with sports background (so that they can pursue their sports interests), individuals with major illnesses (so that they have access to hospitalisation facilities), individuals who have lost their spouse (so that they have access to family support system), and so on. Interestingly there is also a quota for meritorious candidates, and that is just 10 per cent of the overall strength. In the perception of officers at operating levels, the quota system was used even for staffing key positions. For members of such an organisation, the system sends a powerful signal that merit and performance concerns are not high on the priority list, and expectations from individual organisational members are quite low.

*Vicious cycle of ineffective implementation:* Discussions at middle levels indicate that the dominant view of the officers in this category is that they have little information, low control, and high constraints. They perceive the departmental structures and processes as incapable of accommodating their views and ideas. As a result, they see their roles as marginal, and feel that they have little knowledge or information about why certain decisions are made or not made. Not surprisingly, they experience low stakes in them. With many members perceiving low stakes, the system tends to be lethargic. There is little assurance that things would work as they are expected to. Any individual interested in performance or service is required to chase all the time to obtain that performance or service.

Finally, poor implementation leads to a feeling that the organisation does not really care. Decisions are announced when they are no longer relevant. With centralised decision making based on obsolete records, actions can be totally off the mark. In such a scenario, the options available to people are to resign their post in the department, attempt to influence the decision making, or do nothing. In the perception of officers, resignation involves too high personal costs, and is not really an option for them. The burdens associated with attempting to influence departmental decision-making are so high that there are no real incentives to exercise that influence. Unfortunately that leads to the inevitable assumption that they can do very little in the given context. Not surprisingly, there is a tendency for people to become passive and indifferent. We can see how this mindset is likely to be subject to self-reinforcing cycles. When individuals cling to their perception that no initiatives were really expected of them outside a narrowly defined area, they also cease to examine more effective ways of coping with the situation.

### **Relationship with Superior**

A key question is whether superior-subordinate relations create a context in which operating managers experience a sense of self-efficacy. It is generally agreed that the

individual's sense of personal power is closely related to feelings of personal efficacy and a sense of self-worth. It has been found that factors like feelings of mastery related to the job, the superior's exemplary behaviour, and the superior's encouragement and emotional support are significant sources of self-efficacy information. How do operating managers rate the quality of relationships in their organisation?

*Impersonal relationship:* Our observations suggest that the relations with the superior are governed by hierarchy. There is little team work or serious work-related consultation or discussion. The communication within the system is also perceived as ineffective. There are hardly any rewards for performance. Significant changes in work assignments, transfers or promotions are decided at very senior levels. This effectively renders an officer's immediate superior redundant for decisions relating to rewards decisions. In fact, officers perceive the same superiors as competing with them for departmental favours. Few officers consider their superior as someone that they can look up to as a person and/ or as a professional.

*Absence of standard setting and encouragement:* Therefore, there are hardly any instances of superiors exhibiting the following aspects of an enabling style:

1. Having and communicating standards of excellence.
2. Spotting opportunities for changes/innovations.
3. Holding regular discussions on important departmental or organisational priorities.
4. Taking a genuine interest in developing people.
5. Leveling with others and getting out of hierarchical barriers.
6. Building trusting relationships and facilitating team orientation.

### **Nature of Operating Management Roles**

*Narrowly defined roles:* The work at operating levels is perceived as largely routine, fragmented, segmented, and repetitive. Typically a government department has a plethora of sections and sub-sections. These divisions on functional lines give rise to several distinct groups of employees. It is widely believed that boundaries harden around these groups, as a large number of individuals at the lower levels practically spend their entire career in a single group. As a result, there is little collaboration across sections, regions or departments.

Not only work is highly segmented across different functions, it is also fragmented across the various levels of departmental hierarchy. With a large number of levels and functions, individuals also end up with 'non-roles', where there is precious little to do. Each function and level tends to have its own viewpoint, and the integration of these different viewpoints becomes quite difficult.

Moreover, in a tall hierarchy, personnel at the operating levels are primarily concerned with the execution of routine tasks. Most of the time, the roles are restricted to requesting for and chasing support from service functions, or approvals and clearances from higher levels, or cooperation from junior levels. It is widely



perceived that any non-routine decision or developmental activity can only be initiated at senior levels.

*Ineffective performance of developmental role:* At the same time, sections entrusted with the developmental functions are generally perceived to be ineffective because of strong inter-functional boundaries and indifference at operating levels. To sum up, while the personnel at the operating levels face obstacles in performing developmental or entrepreneurial roles, there are relatively fewer problems in choosing the path of non-performance or mediocrity. On the other hand, people charged with developmental responsibilities restrict themselves to preparing plans and strategies on paper while complaining that they receive no cooperation in getting these implemented.

### **The Way Work is done**

By and large, the emphasis at operating levels is more on ‘moving the files’ and ‘completing the paper work’ rather than in performing activities to have an impact. As a result, there is little attention to linkage, integration and people management issues.

*Working through file movements:* For every issue, a file is first opened. The file then makes its rounds through several offices, with individuals adding their notes, writing their comments, and making the file thick over a period of time. For example, a study in a state government department indicated that there was nothing casual about even casual leave application as it involved as many as sixteen steps before it was approved. For something that was a little more complex, such as sanction of earned leave, there were 26 steps. With so many steps, it is easy for an issue to slip and fall through the cracks at some stage in the process, and no feedback may be readily available on how and why the matter has come to a grinding halt.

In moving the files, attention is rarely directed to whether comments and notes actually lead to any useful change. The scheme is finally considered as ‘introduced’ when the office order or circular is released. Monitoring of the implementation is rare.

*Lack of continuity at senior levels:* At senior levels, officials are constantly shuffled around. They rarely get reasonable length of tenures of say, three to five years to make lasting changes. In a study of two districts of Rajasthan, over a 20 year period, the average term of the district collector was found to be 14 months. The same was true for block development officer. Wherever the officers go, they sign papers, write notes, and move files. There are no expectations that they would provide leadership to the department in the real sense of the term by building organisational capability and sustaining high levels of performance through a committed organisation.

While there is no continuity at leadership levels, there is still a high level of centralisation. In a study of a district magistrate in the state of Uttar Pradesh, it was found that 52 of the 66 departmental committees were chaired by the district magistrate. 42 of these committees related to rural development, and 30 of these were chaired by the district magistrate. These committees would not meet in the absence of the chairperson. As day to day issues are also controlled at senior levels, delays are common in decision making. Meaningful change occurs when energetic leaders take the proverbial bull by the horn, act on personal authority and make changes happen. But such instances are rare.

*Little attention to people management:* Lack of attention to personnel issues hampers several initiatives. A state government invested considerable resources to training certain individuals to function as Information Officers for their departments. But the subsequent placements of these individuals had little or no relationship to the training provided. Decisions pertaining to transfers and assignments are largely guided by short term considerations and are rarely based on up to date personnel records and long term plans.

### **Consequences**

How do the factors listed above affect the emotional state of officers at operating levels and the perception about their roles and contributions in the organisation?

With an impersonal and procedure-bound approach, most people feel unappreciated, ignored or even hurt by the larger organisational system. As processes for redressing grievances are largely ineffective, people tend to stay with their residual negative feelings. As a result, very few people believe that they have a 'say' in the functioning of the department. They don't experience a sense of centrality, efficacy and positive influence. Not surprisingly, there is little motivation at work place for setting and achieving standards of excellence. They only respond to specific demands in their narrowly defined work spheres, and let go of opportunities to make improvements.

If we examine the perception of operating level officials, we would notice that a series of short-term steps have resulted in an organisational system that found itself in knots to initiate any meaningful change. There were also a few negative loops or vicious cycles operating in the system, as indicated below:

- When there is a high degree of centralisation, it tends to alienate employees, and so they shirk responsibility. But when individuals don't assume responsibility, it leads to greater centralisation.
- Employee development does not occur when individuals are confined to narrow roles. But this makes them unfit for larger roles over a period of time.
- When middle level officials display passive conformity or passive aggression toward senior and top executives, departmental leaders respond by building hierarchical and procedural walls between them and the operating level executives, which aggravate the negative sentiments.

Several problems also emanate from overstaffing. First and foremost, in an excessively differentiated structure with several departments and sections, it becomes difficult to ensure meaningful assignments, and grant the autonomy required to perform the tasks effectively. So, clear accountabilities are not defined at operating levels. When high performers see a number of employees around them getting away with very little or no performance, they begin to feel that the organisation is taking advantage of them. Stated differently, the organisation's inaction towards the low performers leads the high performers to think of work as a punishment and, as a result, their motivation is adversely affected. On the other hand, when the low or non-performing employees see that their lack of performance does not perceptibly change the work unit's outputs, they may conclude that their work is not very important or meaningful. When there is no guilt associated with lack of contribution, and there is also no external enforcement of accountability, the concerned employees are likely to experience little motivation to improve their performance.

The consequences are obviously serious for the overall performance of the department. As the officers are unable to perceive their roles in a larger systemic context, there are several negative outcomes:

1. There are problems of coordination within the department, and at the interface with other departments and agencies.
2. There is lack of personal and professional development on the job. With the departmental context fostering only narrow specialisation, the officers at the operating levels are unable to provide the leadership that is essential for making the changes required to enhance short term and long term performance.
3. The responsibility for task completion remains diffused, resulting in absence of accountability at various levels.
4. Introduction and management of change runs into problems as operating officers stay rooted in 'spectator' stance, and don't contribute their best to change efforts.
5. As a result, there is gross underachievement of developmental tasks and unresponsive administration characterised by delays, corruption, and poor coordination.

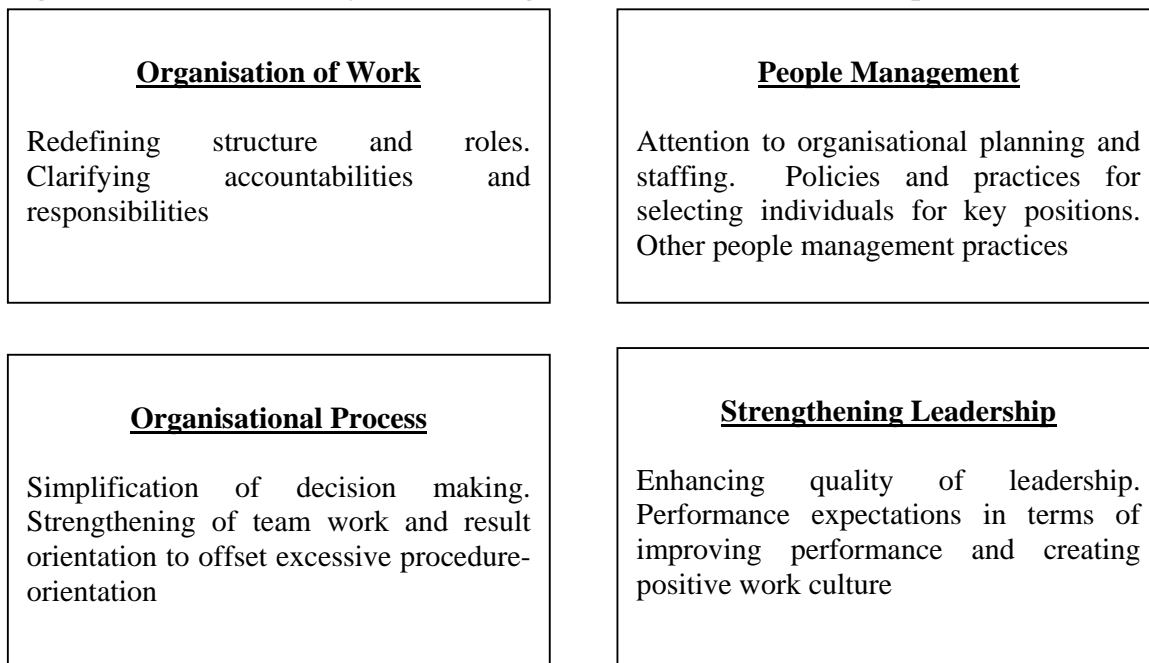
To sum up, the work culture tends to ritualise most things. Activities are undertaken with little concern for outcome and impact. Real concerns do not get expressed in meetings. Different types of reports are prepared at considerable cost, only to be filed away without initiating any corrective actions. People think that they have completed the work when they report a matter. There is little or no demand for performance upward or downward. Perhaps, the biggest crisis is that lower and lower standards of performance and service are accepted in the department without any serious questioning.

### **Overhauling the Structures and Systems**

From discussions so far, we can see that the mindsets of organisational members tend to be quite stable because their roots are in the form of unchanging formal and informal organisational systems. When the organisational factors such as the patterns of organising work, people management practices and interpersonal relationships remain essentially the same, mindsets continue in their old equilibrium state.

If we examine international experiences, we would see that successful changes in the functioning of government have been brought about in some countries by making significant changes in key organisational arrangements. For example, case studies of transformation in these countries indicate that major changes were introduced in four key aspects of the organisation, as shown in Figure 4 below.

**Figure 4: Structural and Systemic Changes Initiated: International Experiences**



*Approaches for organising work:* Significant changes were initiated by redefining organisation structure and roles of organisational members. Interventions were made to identify accountabilities and responsibilities at key levels, and prevent crowding of hierarchy just to provide promotional opportunities for individuals.

*People Management:* Attention was paid to organisational planning and staffing issues. Policies and practices relating to selection and recruitment for key positions underwent dramatic changes. Competency identification and development was taken up especially for critical positions. Different aspects of people management, such as assignment of roles, job rotation, rewards and promotion were strengthened. Efforts were made to ensure a good ‘fit’ among these various components of people management. Different systems and processes were so designed that they complemented and supported each other.

*Organisational Processes:* Decision making was simplified. Team work, result orientation and initiative were strengthened to offset the inevitable pressure for excessive bureaucratisation that governmental functioning implies.

*Leadership Development:* The quality of leadership was enhanced at different levels of the organisation. Leaders were expected to invest efforts to change the work culture by mobilising the energies of operating managers, so that performance improvements can be sustained.

We would notice that these changes address the factors causing the ‘spectator’ mindset that we had outlined in Figure 3. Successful execution of such organisational changes in some governments has led to a significant transformation in the functioning of those governmental organisations.

But we must recognise that the changes of the kind outlined above are large and far reaching. Many of these changes pertain to the larger governmental system, and so are beyond the purview of individual departments/organisations. For successful implementation, power dynamics inherent in such a transformation process have to be confronted and managed. So, they can be initiated only with a strong political will at the highest levels in the government. They are liable to run into cultural inertia, and so without committed leadership and a long term perspective, such changes have little chance of being initiated, let alone taking roots in the departments and succeeding. While there can be little debate on the desirability of such structural changes, unfortunately the probability of their getting introduced in India in the present context appears to be rather remote.

**Change Experiments and Experiences**

*Two broad categories of Change Experiments:* When we examine the actual change efforts that have been attempted in governmental organisations in India, we find that there have broadly been two categories of approaches to bring about change in the organisations and the employee mindsets. These have been outlined in Figure 5 below.

**Figure 5: Overview of Strategic Review and Core Group Approaches**

| <b>Strategic Review Approach</b>  | <b>Core Group Approach</b>  |
|---|---|
| Create new equilibrium by breaking the existing frame of reference for the organisation                                       | Oriented to not disturbing the basic equilibrium. Focus on small doses of incremental changes |
| Aims to transform the entire organisation through new strategy, management processes and approaches in a break through format | Changes affect only part of the organisation, by modifying ways and means of doing work       |
| Generally involves active intervention by external consultants  | Builds on the efforts of organisational members. Little or no involvement of consultants.     |

In one category, change tends to begin with strategic reviews. Such reviews take an overall organisational perspective and usually call for long term changes. This approach seeks to break the existing frame of reference for the organisation and create a new equilibrium. Thus, it aspires to transform the entire organisation. Generally this involves creation of a new strategy, management processes and approaches in a break through format. The intention is to create new services and totally different ways of working. For the purpose of our discussion in this paper, we refer to such change efforts as ‘Strategic Review Approaches’.

Diametrically opposite approach is the one that begins with small doses of incremental changes. These changes affect only certain parts of the organisation. They occur through normal structures and management processes. Being oriented to continuous progression, they don’t disturb the equilibrium.

They seek to build around the efforts of dedicated ‘core groups’ of change agents, who would plan and make small changes actually happen in the department with small investments of efforts. The purpose is also to demonstrate that change is possible from within without additional resources and without larger organisational changes. If the group persists over a period of time and recruits supporters as in social movements, it is expected that changes would result in organisational mindsets. In this paper, we refer to this as ‘Core Group Approach’.

Both Strategic Review Approach and Core Group Approach have been tried out in certain governmental organisations/departments in India. The following sections are based on experiences and observations of these change experiments. We discuss each approach in some detail, and examine what have been observed to be the critical factors that are necessary for the given approach to succeed. Without those critical success factors, the efforts would merely generate a lot of activity and trumpeting, but no real changes. And failed change experiments tend to reinforce the ‘spectator’ mindset in people.

### **Strategic Review Approach**

The overall organisational strategic reviews have been attempted in several state government departments. In these departments consulting studies have been commissioned to take a comprehensive look at the functioning of the organisation. In a few of these state government departments, it would appear that there have been studies conducted sometime or the other on practically every single significant issue. These studies analyse different aspects of the strategy and working arrangement, and present broad recommendations. But experience of actual implementation is hardly encouraging. Very few strategic review reports have been able to make the crucial transition from paper to practice. The ‘knowing’ does not translate into ‘doing’. If we examine the knowing – doing gap by taking a behavioural perspective, we’ll notice three major psychological impediments that strategic review experiments in government organisations have failed to deal with.

Firstly, strategic reviews rely primarily on the rationality and strength of the analysis and alternatives. When organisational members are high on motivation, and are more oriented to ‘actor’ mindset, the strength of argument is sufficient to elicit desired behaviour. Motivated and energetic employee groups would act quickly on an issue if they are convinced of the argument. But as our earlier analysis indicates, the members of governmental organisations are more in ‘spectator’ mode and are short on self-belief or self-efficacy. They are unlikely to be inspired to action merely by the power of logic underlying analysis and alternatives.

Secondly, strategic reviews have tended not to invest sufficient efforts in building ownership, involvement and commitment of people at operating levels, and getting them to initiate requisite actions to make changes happen. Large scale changes need major commitments of time, energy and effort from organisational members for successful implementation. Any demand for big commitment from individuals tends to create cognitive dissonance in those individuals. Psychological studies show that people may be inclined to make small commitments. Over a period of time, they may be willing to enhance the size of commitments. But a large and discontinuous demand right at the start, actually would create resistance to the idea as a result of cognitive dissonance, and reinforce the ‘spectator’ mindset.

Thirdly, such large scale changes require substantial amount of resources to be committed. 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 resources are spread too thinly over several efforts, and there is no continuity of leadership attention and effort, changes don't succeed despite best intentions. 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.

An informal assessment of some of the strategic reviews conducted in government departments/ organisations indicate that few of these have been able to graduate beyond PowerPoint presentations at senior levels. The actual implementation has been very weak. Officials at operating levels in these departments were found to continue in their 'spectator' mode, and were not even aware of the major points that have been raised and discussed in the strategic reviews of their department/organisation.

### **Core Group Approach**

As we have noted, when employees are low on skills, motivation and self esteem, strength of arguments does not necessarily lead to action. In such a scenario, everyone may agree with the issues but no one comes forward to initiate actions required.

As a result, when the leaders or external consultants 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 'foot-in-the-door' would be helpful in such situations. This involves asking people to make small initial commitments. Small commitments lead to small wins. The small wins demonstrate to employees at operating levels that they can change certain things in the department or organisation. 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 experimentation with core group approach is persisted with.

The core group approach has been tried out in certain departments of a state government in India. In these departments, a core group of about 25 individuals were chosen through the process of peer group nominations. A cross section of officials in these departments were asked to think and propose the names of a few individuals, who appeared to possess the following qualities: (a) they were energetic; (b) they were credible; (c) they had a good track record of performance; (d) they were skilled in working with people; and (e) they were capable of effectively catalysing the change process. About 100 to 120 officials were requested to send slips with four to six names anonymously.

On the basis of the nominations of colleagues, a core group of about 25 individuals was constituted for each department. These members were called for a workshop with key leaders of the department and were expected to work on certain focus areas that meet 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.

The core group members were provided some tools and techniques to aid their analysis and problem solving. For example, the group members examined the reports generated at different levels within the department approval processes, meetings attended and procedures or practices for various aspects. They did so by using collective subjective judgments of core group members. They raised questions on what aspects add cost and delays, but very little additional value. A half-day discussion on this broad area was found to be sufficient to clear at least some of the inevitable fat or junk in the system that tends to accumulate over time. The key leaders made decision on the spot on those issues.

In the same way, a format was developed for examining the interface with citizens / customers. This focused on those aspects involving cumbersome procedures, repeated visits, calling for information piecemeal, lack of acknowledgement, absence of time frames for decision making, non-availability of officials for hearing grievances, and so on.

The core group also examined how it could recruit more individuals into the core group. There would be individuals with requisite enthusiasm and skills. There were discussions on how to identify them, induct them into the core group and involve them in appropriate assignments. The general expectation was that the core group would keep expanding over time.

The core groups met formally as a total group once in two months. In the intervening period, informal meetings and implementation of core group decisions were expected to continue. The leadership of the department was expected to support the core group through active involvement, their own willingness to question status quo and take quick actions when individuals and groups came up with ideas and suggestions that were backed by convincing analysis.

When the core group workshops were held, the spontaneous enthusiasm that greeted acceptance of even small changes showed that even small successes provide impetus for further investment of efforts by people, because successes, small or big, provide hope to members that real changes are possible through efforts of officials at operating levels.

As the experiment, described above is less than six months old, it is a little too early for a formal evaluation. But as the experiment has been carried out in about ten



departments and core groups in individual departments have met on more than one occasion, and informal feedback is available, some basic conclusions are possible. The preliminary observations seem to indicate that certain factors emerged as critical for cusses of this approach. These are discussed below.

1. *Motivation and Commitment of Core Group Members:* It was observed that a key success factor was 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 were too few motivated and committed individuals, the group found it difficult to break free of the inertia plaguing the system. Thus it is clear that for the experiment 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 consider their personal cost-benefit equation, but act because they believe in the cause.
2. *Leadership to sustain hope:* Most of the core group members were willing 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 was an important factor in this regard. When leaders did not display much enthusiasm or interest, the core groups seemed to quickly lose their impetus for change. Thus leaders play a key role in providing core group members 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.
3. *Framing of issues or organising of events to aid problem solving:* Simple tools and techniques to structure the analysis and action planning process were 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 were scheduled, they served to provide a context for galvanising people to action. The support for organising events and providing tools for analysis was provided from outside the department.
4. *Expanding core group:* When more numbers could be added to the core group through network of attachments and acquaintances, the approach gained strength. This also led to a more visible and a more positive shift in the mood within the larger department.
5. *Defining the outputs and outcomes desired:* The core group approach is also expected to promote changes in attitude. Achievement is a product of competence and commitment. When leaders make active contribution to defining the priorities clearly in terms of outputs and outcomes desired, motivation of core group members is stimulated. This requires clearly articulating the projects with medium visibility, having worthwhile pay-off, and not demanding very high levels of effort. When there is a clear and

specific demand, there is a spur for creating requisite capacity to meet that demand.

### **Concluding Summary**

We started our discussions by examining the spectator and actor mindsets, and noted that the mindsets in government organisations, particularly at operating levels are characterised by spectator orientation. A study of the spectator mindset shows that it is rooted in certain factors such as:

- Excessively differentiated and rule-board organisation with too many free-riders;
- Hierarchical, impersonal and non-appreciative superior – subordinate relationships;
- Getting work done through file movements, paper work and reports with little attention to linkage, integration and people management; and
- Fragmentation and segmentation of roles and functions, with no rewards for good performance or punishments for poor performance.

As Nobel Laureate Herbert Simon has noted, if we seek to understand the shape that jelly would take, it is important to examine the mould in which the jelly would be poured, rather than the jelly itself. In a similar vein, if we seek to get employees to move away from the spectator orientation, there is a need to overhaul certain structures and systems in the government organisations. This is also borne out by international experiences. This change is not easy, and requires agreement and commitment at the highest levels.

Changes have been attempted in certain government departments/organisations through, what has been termed in this paper as strategic review approach. This approach is typically taken with the help of strategy consultants. It takes a comprehensive look at the organisation and suggests major changes. While there can be no disagreement on the desirability of these changes, the approach can leave the government officials in the role of spectator or skeptics. This is because the strong foundation of leadership and organisation needed for making the changes succeed do not seem to exist in most government departments.

Another approach to change seeks to build around the efforts of specially chosen core groups. These core groups plan and make small changes actually happen with small investments of efforts. In the process, they demonstrate that changes are possible from within without additional resources and without larger organisational changes. This approach too can be sustained only with certain critical success factors. It also remains to be seen whether the new mindset of ‘actor’ orientation can take root, and become sufficiently strong over a period to initiate changes of larger magnitude.

Obviously, all the three approaches are important – larger structural changes, strategic changes and more modest changes in work processes. Each approach requires a certain set of factors to sustain it. Without those factors, initiating changes would be akin to attempting to tend roses in desert soil and desert climate.

Government organisations, particularly in developing countries like India have a significant role to perform. Government officials have to provide service to the public in ways that are: (a) economical – of low cost; (b) efficient – maximising outputs

within budgets through good work practice; (c) effective – satisfying citizens/customers with their quality and timeliness; (d) ethical – fair and honest, and friendly; (e) accountable to end users – open, keeping the public well informed; and (f) responsive – taking into account priorities of clients.

This requires the government officials to unlearn ‘spectator’ mindset and assume the ‘actor’ mindset. Some change levers that can contribute to changing the mindset have been discussed in this paper. But the search for appropriate change levers, change strategies and change practices to achieve the mindset change is far from over.